

Silence is not Golden

a critical anthology of Ethiopian literature



edited
by

Taddesse Adera & Ali Jimale Ahmed





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Introduction

Ali Jimale Ahmed



V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* has a small section in the appendix on "Ethiopian sources of knowledge" gleaned from, what seems to be, to many people, obscure sources. The moment of unearthing such treasures is, no doubt — and perhaps rightly so — for the scholar, one of exultation and joy. Yet the obscurity of these sources does not emanate from an inherent weakness, but from, to use Walter Ong's words, a "cultural squint" (20). Mudimbe's Ethiopia is synonymous with Africa-Ethiopia, in this sense, being the location which signifies operative tropes of an Africa that is south of the Sahara, itself a European invention. As Jenny Hammond and Nell Druce write in *Sweeter than Honey*, "Ethiopia comes from a Greek word meaning "burnt faces" and was used for the peoples living south of Egypt"¹ (15). What the name suggests is the importance of Ethiopia for all those whose "swarthy faces" correlate and cor-

roborate generically through the name common experiences that are woven into the narrative threads of their existence. "Therefore," explains Hilaal in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*, "Ethiopia becomes that generic notion, expansive, inclusive" (148).

It is in this sense that J.E. Casely-Hayford's (by some accounts Ghana's first novelist) *Ethiopia Unbound* can be read. The novel was published in London in 1911 — a very important year for Ethiopia, the country. For it was in 1911 that Menelik II inaugurated the first printing press in Addis Abeba. Whether Casely-Hayford was aware of this event or not, the untying of the tongue in the form of the printing press parallels the feat of the mythical Prometheus in Greek mythology who stole fire for humankind. Prometheus' actions had two purposes, viz., to humanize fire, and by so doing, subvert the hierarchical authority extant in the mythologies. Likewise, Menelik's actions Ethiopianized, in both the micro and macro sense of the word, the printing press. The domiciliation of printing was meant to secure a parity with Europe. Menelik, like his counterpart Mohammed Ali of Egypt who established the printing press in his country in 1821, was aware that the printed word as a form of discourse would become another arena whose location/space would certainly invite intense rivalry among nations. To Menelik, one could argue, the battle of ideas would be as important as the battle of the flint gun. This does not, however, attempt to gloss over the contradictions that have plagued the Horn of Africa for centuries. What it attempts to convey is that within these ruptures and contradictions are to be found inchoate sentiments which reflect a common destiny for the groups in the Horn.

TRADITIONAL LITERATURE, POETRY AND LINGUISTICS

It is to this end that Solomon Deressa — a poet of international stature — embarks through the poem and its matrices on an important journey, if journey is understood to mean a temporary or permanent physical or mental separation of an individual from his/her immediate surroundings. The returnee — that is, if and when there is a homecoming in Ngugi's sense of the term — will no longer be the same person who had earlier embarked on the journey. Also, the immediate surrounding, the "source" as Amilcar Cabral put it, does not remain the

same. Solomon Deressa's concern at this juncture of history is not to reclaim/espouse a specific heritage/source; on the contrary, he transcends ethnic, national and geographic boundaries. His call goes beyond Ethiopia; his is a call for the collective harnessing of the Horn's communal treasures, including poetry. This call emanates from the necessity to speak in communal terms of a "we" that is inclusive, of an "us/them" that is no longer conceived nor structured in contrapuntal images. Instead, Solomon Deressa writes: "We, Amharas, Eritreans, Gurages, Oromos, Somalis, Tigras, and the owners of four score other names...have had to learn to re-conceptualize, re-emote and re-member Ethiopia, Eritrea, Oromia, or Somalia, and consequently our individual selves." In essence, Deressa urges us to forget in order to remember, for as Renan asserts, "every nation must forget its past before it can begin to reconstitute it" (qtd. in Ahmed & Markovitz 80).

Poetry could play a multiplicity of roles towards that end. Poetry, Deressa tells us, is an important genre/activity. In Ethiopia, he wrote elsewhere, "poetry is both a very serious affair and a popular pastime" (62). Yet, according to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*, Ethiopian poetry is "a non-existent entity." Lest one say "who cares what they say?" we should be aware of the ability of the center to export nuances of re-packaged cultures back to the empire. In relation to this, a character in Farah's *Maps* seems to give credence to the claim of the encyclopedia writers. Cusmaan, as the character is called, argues:

Her [Ethiopia's] national language, although spoken by a minority, has had a script from long before Christ. And yet, how is it that this country, that has been independent all through the ages of documented history, this Ethiopia whose population is ten times that of Somalia's; this Ethiopia, with a script long before Christ—how is it that Ethiopia has not produced one poet, ancient or contemporary, relying either on the oral or the written form, one single Ethiopian genius of a poet, who is comparable to Somalia's hundreds of major poets that Somalis can field? (201)

What the character in the novel is ignorant about or chooses to ignore is the depth and history of Ethiopian poetry. Deressa's own poetry, including his book *Li'jnett* (Youth) (1970), dispels

any such erroneous notion. The wax-and-gold contour of the *gene* is marked by its artistic eloquence and aesthetic beauty. The *dabteras* and other traditional poets who compose beautiful poetry—whether the *wayyag* or *geerarsa*—are known for their subtle wit.

What Farah's character, tells us about, however, is the paucity of materials on Ethiopian literature. Most studies on Ethiopian literature are in the main bibliographic. Since the bulk of this literature is not in European languages, these studies, as Hailu Fullas ably demonstrates, tend to historicize and/or annotate translated vignettes. On the other hand, there is a plethora of linguistic studies on some Ethiopian languages. This interest in Ethiopian languages reflects a tradition in which, as Timothy Brennan argues in "The National Longing for Form," "literature [is] a discipline with roots in a philological tradition" (44).

Yet, the scene of Ethiopian languages is far from being rosy. The issue of language is a constant source of friction. To map out a strategy and guide us into the intricate labyrinths of Ethiopia's linguistic landscape, a leading scholar and linguist, Abraham Demoz [following Renan's "language invites people to unite, but it does not force them to do so," (16)] questions the rationale of promulgating laws — assizes, if you will — that establish *lingua francas*.

A leading scholar on Ge'ez, Getatchew Haile deftly proves the syncretistic powers of African traditions. Ethiopia's great strides in the field of philosophy and literature had their roots in 1) the fostering of an ambience conducive to the free flow of knowledge, 2) the asylum it gave to scholars from other parts of the world, and 3) the diligence of its scholars. By taking issue with writers like Conti Rossini, who questioned either the authenticity or autochthony of some Ethiopian documents or the nationality of some of its early writers, Haile takes us into a familiar ground of racial and national myths. Radin in *The Racial Myth* writes, "These myths lead to all sorts of fantastic illusions of superiority. Woltmann claims, Giotto, Alighieri, Bruno, Ghiberti, Vinci, Arouet, and Tasso as being of German stock — Jothe, Aigler, Braun, Wilbert, Wincke, Arwid, and Dasse. The humor of this mythic outburst is nullified by the bloodshed which defended it" (qtd. in Cuthbertson 195). In short, questioning and throwing doubt on the identity of

Ethiopian authors harkens back to Felix Mnthali's queries:
 just which people on this rapacious 'man-eat-man' earth
 have not been told the soul of their glory
 belongs to someone else
 and that the monuments of their sweat and the apex of their
 minds
 were only borrowed clothes left behind by invaders
 and by birds of passage? (186)

Yet by contesting such spurious myths, Haile ironically falls into a similar trap when he writes, "Medieval Ethiopia was a country surrounded by nations with no or little literary traditions." Haile's words take us back to the juxtapositions we had created earlier between Solomon Deressa and one of Nuruddin Farah's characters in *Maps* about the paucity of poetry in Ethiopia. By bringing these contradictions to the fore, we hope to show that our interest is not to patch up differences wherever they may exist.

ETHIOPIAN FICTION WRITING: A SYNOPSIS²

As Getatchew Haile's essay reveals, Ethiopian writing has its roots in a bifurcated development: ecclesiastical narratives and royal chronicles. The first recounts the glories of God, while the second deals with the heroic feats of the royalty. Royal chronicles which, no doubt, possess the lure of ecclesiasticism (by utilizing religio-mythical lexicon), also give rise to secular writing. A combination of religious and secular writings flourished between the 13th and 16th centuries. However, as a result of the religious wars that had ravaged the Horn of Africa in the 16th century, the growth of this kind of literature almost comes to a halt towards the end of the century. In short, a hiatus emerges. This period of relative unproductivity lingers in to the early part of the 20th century.

A resurgence of Ethiopian writing is experienced in the early 20th century. This period, which could be characterized as the renaissance of Ethiopian writing, starts in 1900 and comes to a close in 1935. A young crop of European-educated intellectuals began to experiment with modern forms of fiction writing. It is to this experimentalist group that the first Ethiopian novel and the first modern drama owe their emergence. Afeework Gebra-yesus published the first Ethiopian novella in 1908; while

Germachew Tekle-Hawariat produced the first modern play in 1930. It was also in this period that the theme of the “been-to” (later popularized by other African writers writing in European languages) first surfaced in the African continent with Heruy Wolde-Sellassie’s *Addis Alem* (The New World).

Unfortunately, this period is also stunted by the ravages of another war of a different nature. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia heralds a second hiatus in which fiction writing comes to a momentary halt. The Italian fascists embarked on a genocidal war against the Ethiopian people. Hoping to destroy all forms of resistance to their brutal conquest, the invading army attempted to annihilate the country’s traditional intellectuals. The Italians also burned books *en masse*. So, between 1935 and 1941, Ethiopian literary writing became dormant, as surviving intellectuals joined resistance groups to free their country from colonial yoke.

With the defeat of Mussolini’s army in World War II, Ethiopians began to attempt the mother of all struggles: the construction of a viable country. Writers and poets became the vanguard for the construction of new paradigms of development, and also for the reinvention of culture. To achieve their aims, writers and poets like Taddese Liben, Kebede Mikael and Mengistu Lemma began using their artistic talents for pedagogical purposes. The period is marked by a tremendous outpouring of literary production. This production was, in a sense, a living testimony to a renewed hope extant in all facets of Ethiopian life. However, as the 1950s drew to a close, it became apparent that Haile-Selassie’s regime could not deliver its promises nor keep up with the hopes and aspirations of the people. The 1950s and 1960s saw a country slowly descending into the abyss. Progressive writers and poets of this period represent the conscience of the people. By employing allegorical language, some of the writers gave harrowing accounts of life under the Haile-Selassie feudal regime. By producing works laden with symbolism, the writers undermined the regime’s constructed aura of invincibility. To put it differently, their writing resembles the coming of the storm. The government resorted to censorship to stifle all forms of self-expression. However, the government’s attempts in denying voice to the indigenous intellectuals came to no avail. The clock had already started ticking against the regime. It was, therefore, no surprise that Haile-

Selassie's overthrow was midwived by popular revolt.

With the overthrow of the Haile-Selassie regime, a third hiatus emerges in the Ethiopian literary scene. This gap extends from 1974 to 1979. The reasons for its emergence are many, but three perhaps deserve mention. First, this period of dormancy is precipitated by a desire on the part of the writers to assess the new realities. Secondly, it is possible that some of the writers were deeply immersed in the "thick" of events, that they were forced to momentarily stop practicing their profession. Finally, the gap might have been caused by the turmoil which followed the revolution. Internal civil wars and later Somalia's invasion of Ethiopia might have affected the viability of the publishing industry, controlled by the state. In short, the state printing presses were perhaps stretched to the limit by producing state propaganda.

Gradually, however, the situation cleared, and Mengistu Haile-Mariam emerged as the strong man of the Derg (Committee) installed to power by the military which had triumphantly eliminated its rivals. Two of the most powerful rivals to the military were the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (E.P.R.P.) and MEISON. Both groups had Marxist tendencies and were led by progressive students as well as other revolutionary elements within the society. The Derg, however, did not make use of only the sword, but goaded its supporters among the traditional intellectuals to use the power of the pen. Writers sympathetic to the regime's cause unleashed a highly partisan literature. This brand of sectarian literature depicted anti-Derg forces as degenerates, malcontents, feudal left-overs, drifters, etc. Bealu Girma's *Ye Kei Kokeb Tiri* (The Call of Red Star), published in 1980, is a case in point. In his attempt to denigrate the E.P.R.P., Girma paints a picture of an organization run by diletantes. Unwittingly, however, the author shows the government's own supporters to be opportunistic. Other writers who had taken up the cudgel for the Derg include Birhanu Zerihun and Taddele Gebre-Hiywot. These writers were soon to find out that they had been had. In Girma's case, as we shall see later, finding the truth would mean trouble.

TOBYA AS A FOUNDATIONAL TEXT

While it is impossible to deal with the entirety of Ethiopian fiction writing of any period, the contributors to this volume focus

on some representative novels. No Ethiopian novel or novella has, perhaps, generated more critical discussion than Afework Gabreyesus' *Lebb-Wallad Tarik (Toby)*. This is necessitated by the fact, among others, that *Toby* is a story celebrating the birth of the nation-state. It attests to that early attempt by dominant groups or classes to install a hegemonic supranational consciousness. *Toby* as a "foundational" (71-98), to use Doris Sommer's apt definition of Latin American texts of similar intentions, *Bildungsroman* dealing with the "tensions" inherent in the formation of the nation-state attest to Brennan's arguments that nations "are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role" (49). Brennan's words hint at the active role of literature to shape and inform historical processes.³

Both Yonas Admassu and Taye Assefa show in their analyses of *Toby* the futility of creating "master-narratives" with roots in other cultures. In short, they remind us that craft is culture-bound. For a narrative like *Toby*, which is in the allegorical mode, it behooves one to analyze how the foundational text affects and is affected by its political content. For, indeed, as Homi Bhabha argues in the introduction of *Nation and Narration*, "The emergence of the political 'rationality' of the nation as a form of narrative—textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts and figurative strata-gems—has its own history" (2). It is this history that Yonas Admassu and Taye Assefa, in different ways, retrace and explore.

NOVELS OF DISILLUSIONMENT

From the foundational novel, we move to novels of disillusionment. Fikre Tolossa's handling of Haddis Alemayehu's *Fikir iska Magibir* (Love Until the Grave) sets the pace for this section. Tolossa shows through plot and character analysis the early signs of disintegration in the social fabric of the feudal enterprise which the novel examines. Gender and class inequities are carefully delineated. The feudal lord's oppression of the human spirit does not spare his own daughter. The daughter, in turn, flouts his orders and injunctions. The fate of the daughter reveals the grim irony of "The lady in the feudal's house/ [who] Sits idle, with her hands/ Adorned with gold and

henna" (Hammond & Druce 30).

Ghirmai Negash's cogent analysis of Abe Gubenyä's *Alwelledim* (I Refuse to Be Born) shows a feudal order that no longer enjoys absolute hegemony. The questions of the fetus reveal the locus of the mother's powerlessness and consequently force the peasant woman to confront her deprivations. The subversion of conventional logic in the narrative is impelled by the magnitude of political indoctrination which breeds a sense of reified weakness in the peasantry. The feudal order that Gubenyä takes to task has for centuries employed different tactics and ruses to subdue the human spirit. Strong antidotes are required to unbound that captive spirit. What was installed through miracles (read feudal structures deemed to reflect divine/natural laws) is now demolished by a similarly potent miracle, the unborn speaking. Thus, speech denied to the mother/peasant by the powers-that-be is now restored to her by the normally "mute" fetus. Gubenyä's retreat to the fetal domain for revolutionary rhetoric anticipates Armah's cry that "the beautiful ones are not yet born." Yet in Gubenyä's novel, the cynicism that usually accompanies our disenchantment with a present that is devoid of the beautiful is tempered by a looming shadow, viz., every pregnant woman is a potential bearer of recalcitrant unborn — both male and female. Gubenyä's novel has affinities with other novels from across the world, including Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, where miraculous things structure the narratives. All three novels subvert our sense of the real in order to jolt us from apathy. In short, what Virgil Nemoianu says about *The Master and Margarita* in his *A Theory of the Secondary* holds true for *Alwelledim*: "It is here that the basic strategy of literary dissent can be located. At the moment that a solution can no longer find permission inside social reality, the literary work activates a simultaneous series of intellectual reversals. There is, as in the case just described (which is exemplary), the denial of reality" (16).

If Gubenyä's portrayal of life under Emperor Haile-Selassie was tragic, life under Mengistu's dictatorial rule was farcical. Gubenyä predicts the advent, as well as the eventual demise, of the Derg. Bealu Girma's *Oromai* (Gone Are the Good Old Days; *Déjà vu*) picks up the story from where Gubenyä left

off. Tadesse Adera's discussion of the novel shows the persistent need in dictatorial regimes to use traditional and organic intellectuals who speak, as Gramsci put it, the language and idiom of the people. Bealu Girma's first novel, *Ke Admas Bashager* (Beyond Horizon) bolstered his standing among the poor and also in the eyes of the progressive intellectuals. Girma, however, was to be had by the progressive pronouncements of the Mengistu regime. Dictatorial regimes in the Horn have been known for their chicanery to manipulate the masses by utilizing the indigenous intellectuals. For the honest intellectual who discovers at a later stage the regime's true colors, fate places him/her in an unenviable situation. Being alienated from the people by his/her involvement with the regime, such an intellectual is forced to either wallow deeper in political mud or to silence his/her art. Girma chose a third option, viz., that of appeasing his conscience and absolving himself from guilt incurred through his past associations with the Derg. *Oromai* can thus be seen as an expiation, an atonement of a sort. Ironically, the novel, as Tadesse Adera shows, "secured his reputation [while at the same time] seal[ing] his fate." Gubanya's unexpected and mysterious death is similarly blamed on the Derg.

ETHIOPIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

There is a paucity of writing in European languages in the Horn. Ethiopia like Somalia and the Sudan has established an African language as the official language of the country. While the concrete problems discussed in Demoz's essay still hold true, Amharic has enabled Ethiopians of different nationalities the possibilities of communicating with one another. It has, by the same token, precluded the mushrooming of foreign languages on Ethiopian soil. Professor Ali Mazrui ties the paucity of works in European languages in the Horn to an absence of "a vertical cultural dualism" vis-a-vis European languages. Ethiopia, like Somalia, Eritrea, etc., does not confer on English, for example, the prestige it enjoys in certain parts of Africa where English has remained the official language. The absence of vertical cultural dualism vis-a-vis European languages does not mean, as Mazrui seems to argue, that the "multiplicity of indigenous cultures in most African countries is characterized by a 'horizontal cultural pluralism'" (49). That that is not the

case is shown by Demoz's essay and by observing the nature of subcultural disputes in many parts of Africa.

Be that as it may, Ethiopian fiction writing in English is in its infancy. It has its origins in the early 1960s. To be specific, Abe Gubanya's *The Savage Girl* is the putative ancestor of this literature. Thus the book's extrinsic value outweighs its intrinsic importance. Other writers who have thus far published enduring works in English include Ashenafi Kebede, Solomon Deressa, Daniachew Worku, Mengistu Lemma, Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin and B. M. Sahle-Sellassie. Sahle-Sellassie is the most prolific of them all.

Like Farah in Somalia, Sahle-Sellassie is the only Ethiopian writer who has thus far published more than three novels in English. By analyzing Sahle-Sellassie's *Firebrands*, Tadesse Adera brings to the fore a whole new dimension of the paradigmization of the culture of corruption in the nation-state. By engaging in inter-textual analysis, Adera reads *Firebrands* in relation to and against Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. In both novels, the role of the intellectual in nation-building is of paramount importance.

Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin is an outstanding poet and playwright who has published many works in English. Like his fellow playwright and compatriot, Mengistu Lemma, Gabre-Medhin's works have a healthy "obsession" with the past—the past as a powerful competitor with the present. Biodun Jeyifo's lucid explication of Tsegaye plays brings to our attention the attempts of an artist who not only criticizes, but provides real alternatives.

Gabre-Medhin's attempts to provide constructive criticism are duplicated in the writings of the contributors to this volume. The dual function of the "creative" critic consists of making your case, while at the same time building on the fine work of your predecessors. This includes "refuting" some arguments that have seeped into whatever literary discourse exists. As the nature of a volume that deals with the delineation of what Hannah Arendt calls "that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance," the present volume has a precursorial contour. Being the cumulative experiential wisdom of diverse African groups with different ecological, linguistic, creed and ecumenical denominations, Ethiopian literature is as old as the country itself. Any critical volume on such literature must not only aspire to fill a lacuna

as it pertains to socio-historical periodization and/or thematization, but must also put great emphasis on its evaluative and interpretative aspects. Thus, it is our sincere belief that "this volume is a collective act of critical consciousness, as much to be regarded for critical knowledge as for social-historical engagements" (Said xi). Needless to say, however, no single volume could aspire to cover the depth and magnitude of such literature. It must be remembered with Samuel Johnson who, in the Preface to the *Dictionary of the English Language*, wrote, "In this work, when it shall be found that much is omitted, let it not be forgotten that much likewise is performed." For the contributors to this volume this is only the beginning of a beginning.

NOTES

1. Cf. "The word 'Ethiopia' emanates from a connection of three old black Egyptian words, *Et*, *Op*, and *Bia*, meaning 'truth and peace, up and upper, country and land.' *Et-Op-Bia* is land of Upper truth or land of higher peace." [Teklu Tabor, "Interview with Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin," *Ethiopian Review* (August 1993):19.]
2. Much of the information on the historical background of Ethiopian literature is gleaned from the following sources: Paul E. Huntsberger, compiled, *Highland Mosaic: A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature in English, Africa Series No.19* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1973); Donald N. Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Albert S. Gerard, *Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Fikre Tolossa, "Realism and Amharic Literature" Ph.D. diss. University of Bremen, 1983; Reidulf Knut Molvaer, *Tradition and Change in Ethiopia: Social and Cultural Life as Reflected in Amharic Fictional Literature ca. 1930-1974* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980); and Ali Jimale Ahmed, "Solomon Deressa," *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century* (New York: Continuum, 1993).
3. Cf. "All this assumes that literature has the capacity to intervene in history, to help construct it" (Sommer 78).

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State Policy and the Medium of Expression

Abrham Demoz



SUMMARY

The fact that there are about 5,000 languages spoken today in about 200 nation states indicates that multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception among nations of the world. In Ethiopia alone there are nearly 100 languages. Ethiopia's language-policy problems are on the whole typical of the problems in the rest of the world. The changeover from a traditional (or colonial) state, mainly limited to defense and internal security, to a modern state which is multifunctional, intrusive, and intensely communicative, had the effect of increasing the functional load of language in society. Language thus became an economic and political resource. This change must be viewed against the three functions of language, which are (1) instrumental, (2) symbolic, and (3) cognitive. In its instrumental role, language became either an advantage or a handicap. In its

symbolic role, it fostered arrogance in some and diffidence in others. In its cognitive role, it promoted the world view of some and downgraded that of others. This called for an equitable and sociologically sound language policy. Primarily Ethiopian data are used to discuss some principles whereby judicious language policies might be developed for multilingual societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Estimates of the number of languages spoken around the globe vary greatly both because of shortage of reliable empirical surveys and because of definitional disagreements about what constitutes a language and what a dialect. Even so, 5,000 is a figure that few could consider excessive. The number of sovereign nations in the world is known not to exceed 200. It comes as no surprise therefore that multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception among nation states around the globe. Most of the nations of Africa, Ethiopia included, fall into this norm and share both the ethnocultural richness and the manifold sociopolitical problems normally associated with multilingualism.

2. THE ETHIOPIAN LANGUAGE AREA

With over 90 languages spoken by a population of 46 million (1984 official population estimate, CSO 1987), Ethiopia ranks  linguistically among the most diversified countries in the world. The evidence is quite strong in fact that Ethiopia, being now the area of highest diversity, may have been the point of origin and diffusion of one of the great language superfamilies of the world, namely the Afroasiatic. Three of the members of this superfamily, Semitic, Cushitic, and Omotic, with about 8, 30, and 25 languages respectively, have been well represented in Ethiopia from the earliest periods of history, and two of them, Cushitic and Omotic, are represented nowhere else.

3. THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Historically, by far the most prominent language in Ethiopia has been Ge'ez (also termed Geez or Ethiopic). It was the court language in the days of the Axumite empire which flourished from the beginning of the Christian era till the ninth century. Subsequently, Ge'ez continued down to our own days as the literary and ecclesiastical language. The only language that rivals

Ge'ez to any degree in historical importance is Amharic. Emerging as the court language of Ethiopia in the 13th century with the return of the so-called "Solomonic" dynasty, Amharic has continued to play a preeminent role in the nation until the present. It began to become a literary language of some significance in the 19th century, though we do find some samples of written Amharic earlier, and it received a great boost in this respect when Emperor Tewodros, unlike all his predecessors, had his chronicle written in Amharic rather than in Ge'ez (Ullendorff 1960). The few non-Amharic-speaking monarchs who have ascended the throne of Ethiopia since the 13th century appear to have used Amharic as the "public" language. It would be misleading to speak of an "official" or "national" language of Ethiopia in the pre-modern period, as will become clear in our subsequent discussion.

For all intents and purposes, Amharic achieved "official" status during the reign of Emperor Menelik (1881-1913), although there is no known legislation or imperial decree to that effect. Menelik's own extensive chronicle was written in Amharic (Gebre-Sellassie 1967), although, strangely enough, Maurice de Coppet's French translation (De Coppet 1930, 1932) was published long before the Amharic original saw the light of day. The chronicle makes reference to an aspect of Menelik's putative linguistic interest, the reform of the writing system (Demoz 1983).

The Amharic writing system was inherited directly from Ge'ez. A number of new letters (based on the Ge'ez letter-set) were added in the 14th century to accommodate sounds, mostly palatals, peculiar to Amharic. At a later period the Ge'ez writing system, with appropriate minor modifications, was used for a number of Ethiopian languages, most notably for Tigrigna and for Afan Oromo (formerly known as Galla).

Amharic legally achieves the status of an official language on the promulgation of the Revised Constitution of 1955 of which article 125 states: "The official language of the Empire is Amharic."

In Eritrea, during the Federation (1952-1962), the official languages were Tigrigna and Arabic. The elimination of these languages from most public roles by Ethiopia soon after the annexation of Eritrea in 1962, was one of the more important bones of contention leading to a major escalation of

Eritrea's struggle for separation from Ethiopia. Eritrea itself is a multilingual region with eight languages spoken locally: Tigrigna, Tigre, Bilen, Saho, Beja, Nara (Kunama), Bazen (Barya), and Arabic. The leadership of the liberation movements appears to be highly conscious of the challenges of linguistic pluralism and has a well-articulated multinational policy that has already been put into practice in the educational and social systems of areas under its control (Firebrace & Holland 1986).

In sharp contrast to the Eritrean leadership, the Ethiopian leadership during the Imperial era never developed any well-articulated linguistic/ethnic policy. As a matter of fact, any discussion of this topic by the media or in other public forums was considered taboo. The constitutional conferral of an official status on Amharic was further buttressed by some subsidiary legislation. Berhane Mogese compiled legal provisions relating to language for a brief article on government language policy prepared by R.L. Cooper (1976). The intent and effect of all the legislation was the promotion of Amharic and the discouragement of all other languages. For instance, in the law relating to missionary activities in Ethiopia, all missionaries, who normally prefer to use local vernaculars to preach the gospel, are required to use Amharic for all instruction except for a brief transitional period, "until such time as pupils and missionaries...shall have a working knowledge of the Amharic language" (Cooper 189).

The government's policy on the use of local languages on radio was another study in poor political judgment. Only those ethnic groups who rebelled were rewarded with the use of their language for broadcast. It seemed like a policy designed to incite rebellion (Demoz 1968). Somali and Afar were the earliest local languages to be used on radio, followed by Tigre and Tigrigna, and finally by Oromo, the language of one of the two most populous ethnic groups in the country.

POLICY UNDER THE SOCIALIST REGIME

The distinguishing feature of the linguistic/ethnic policy of the "socialist" Derg regime had been the enormous chasm that separates rhetoric from reality. Two major forces appear to have acted to shape the Derg's "policy on nationalities," to use the terminology of regimes of Marxist-Leninist orientation as the

military government of Ethiopia had always claimed to be. On the one hand, it continued to be strongly influenced by the inertia of the imperial policy of Amhara linguistic-cultural-political hegemony. On the other, it had sought to implement the Marxist ideal of political centralism and cultural-linguistic pluralism. By and large, the Derg's practice had been guided by the former and its rhetoric by the latter. As a matter of fact, the only area where linguistic pluralism had been attempted on any scale in practice had been the much flaunted literacy campaign. Even here, however, there remain serious questions, as I have tried to show elsewhere (Demos 1986), about the quality of the vernacular literacy training, the quality of reading material, and above all, the number of new literates who lapse back into illiteracy.

The Derg's policy projected that eventually fifteen of the languages spoken in Ethiopia **will be used as media of instruction** at the lowest grades. It is not altogether clear how much of this objective has actually been achieved. Nor is it clear on what basis precisely the fifteen languages were chosen. The languages chosen were Amharic, Oromo, Tigrigna, Walaita, Somali, Hadiya, Gidole, Tigre, Kambata, Kunama, Sidama, Silti (a Gurage language), Afar, Kefa-Mocha, and Saho. Although the number of speakers had clearly been an important consideration, it is hard to see how Gidole, Silti, and Kunama could rank among the fifteen most widely spoken languages while languages such as Beja, Me'en, Konso, and Kullo-Konta do not. It is also not clear why Saho and Afar are treated as two separate languages when in fact they are so much alike.

How far up the educational scale a vernacular is to be used as a medium of instruction should be up to the speakers of that vernacular to determine. A central government should assist such efforts on an equitable basis and to the limit of its material and human resources. Since the alternative to a liberal, pluralist policy on nationalities often is (and, in the case of Ethiopia, has been amply demonstrated to be) a disastrous and crushingly expensive civil war, the support for a sound language policy as part of a policy on nationalities should come very high on the budgetary priorities of any multilingual society.

The Derg had established an Institute of Nationalities whose function was to make policy studies concerning the many nationalities of Ethiopia which are in fact linguistically defined.

One of the Institute's major tasks had been to propose a new administrative redistricting map which is supposed to pay greater regard to the ethnolinguistic realities of the nation. The redistricting map was said to be in place, but its specific implications for language policy were not fully apparent.

There is a crying need for a population census. Such a census should include questions about mother languages and other languages for each individual. In the absence of such data, all information about numbers of speakers and even about language boundaries must be viewed with a measure of healthy skepticism.

ETHIOPIAN LANGUAGES WITH 50,000 OR MORE SPEAKERS

On the basis of the best information available, I present here a listing of those languages of Ethiopia that are spoken by 50,000 or more people and would therefore be appropriate for use as media of instruction on a priority basis.

Table I.

Ethiopian Languages spoken by 50,000 or more people.

1. AFRO-ASIATIC

1.1 Cushitic

1.1.1 Eastern

1.1.1.1 Afar-Saho group

1.1.1.1.1. Afar: 370,000

1.1.1.2 Macro-Oromo

1.1.1.2.1 Konso: 100,000

1.1.1.2.2 Oromo (Galla): far-flung, diverse,
over 10 million

1.1.1.3 Sidamo group

1.1.1.3.1 Derasa (Gedeo): 250,000

1.1.1.3.2 Hadiya: 700,000

1.1.1.3.3 Kambata (Alaba): 250,000

1.1.1.3.4 Sidamo: 900,000

1.1.1.4 Somali group

1.1.1.4.1 Somali (Ogaden-Harti): 1.5 million
in Ethiopia

1.1.2 Central

1.1.2.1 Awngi: 50,000

1.1.2.2 Bilen (Bogos): 50,000

1.1.3 North

1.1.3.1 Beja (ti-Bedawye): 80,000

1.1.4 Oromo

1.1.4.1 Boran: 140,000

1.2 Omotic

1.2.1 Kaffa group

1.2.1.1 Kafficho (Kefa): 170,000

1.2.1.2 Moch'a (with Kafficho: 170,000)

1.2.2 Omoto cluster

1.2.2.1 Kullo-Konta: 82,000

1.2.2.2 Walaita (Walamo), with dialects: 1,000,000

1.3 Semitic

1.3.1 Southwest Group

1.3.1.1 Arabic, few native speakers, culturally important as religious and written language of Muslims

1.3.2 Ethio-Semitic

1.3.2.1 Northern

1.3.2.1.1 Geez (Ge'ez, Ethiopic), no native speakers but culturally important as historical literary language

1.3.2.1.2 Tigre (Khasa): 250,000

1.3.2.1.3 Tigrigna: 5,000,000 (Decsy, Bender)

1.3.2.2 Southern

1.3.2.2.1 Amharic: 15,000,000

1.3.2.2.2 Gurage, entire cluster: about 750,000 (Demos)

1.3.2.2.3 Adare (Harari): 25,000

(totally urban, written)

2. NILO-SAHARAN

2.1 Chari-Nile

2.1.1 Eastern Sudanic

2.1.1.1 Anuak: 56,000

2.1.1.2 Nuer (Abigar): 50,000

2.1.1.3 Surma group

2.1.1.3.1 Me'en: 70,000

2.1.2 Kunama branch

2.1.2.1 Kunama (Bazen): 55,000

2.1.3 Berta branch

2.1.3.1 Wetawit (Berta): 50,000

2.2 Koman

2.2.1 Gumuz (Ngisi Baxa): 53,000*

Regrettably, no figures are available on the incidence of bilingualism which is known to be widespread in the more accessible areas of the country, especially with Amharic, Oromo and Tigrigna. More is said on this issue in the main text of this paper.

THE REGIONAL, CONTINENTAL, AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

As one looks at the Ethiopian linguistic situation, what strikes one is not so much its uniqueness as its similarity to the situation in many other countries on a regional, continental, and global scale. Such similarity naturally suggests a search for common features in the genesis, development, and ultimate resolution of the problems associated with multilingualism in society.

On a regional scale, Ethiopia contrasts notably but in different ways with its neighbor to the east, Somalia, and its neighbor to the west, the Sudan. Somalia is unique in the region and is among a small number of countries on the continental and global scales in being a truly monolingual state. Sudan, on the other hand, is highly multilingual. Though it has fewer languages than Ethiopia, Sudan nevertheless has sharper ethnic cleavages because the major linguistic divide, the one between Arabic and non-Arabic speech, also coincides

*Figures for numbers of speakers are highly tentative. In the absence of reliable census data, informed estimates from various sources have been used. The major sources were: Grimes, B.F. (ed.). 1978. *Ethnologue*. Wycliffe Bible Translators, Huntington Beach, California; Decsy, G. (ed.). 1988. *Statistical Report on the Languages of the World as of 1985*. Eurolingua, Bloomington, Indiana; and Bender, M.L. *Ethiopian Language Directory* (in preparation). My sincere thanks to Professor Bender for making his card file available to me for the preparation of this paper. See also Bender, et al. (1976), *Language in Ethiopia*.

largely with a religious divide between Muslim and non-Muslim and generally also with a "racial" divide between "Arabized" and "non-Arabized" Africans. The cleavages tend to reinforce each other. It would appear that Sudan's problems of integration are considerably more intractable than those of Ethiopia.

Among nations on the African continent as a whole, Ethiopia fits the norm in being highly multilingual, but is unique in not having a colonial past and its linguistic concomitants. In a great many African countries, serious problems of language conflict remain thinly veiled because these countries have chosen to retain the colonial languages as the official languages to avoid opening what they fear may be a Pandora's box. No such temporizing was possible for Ethiopia because there was no colonial language to hold on to while waiting for lasting solutions to the problems of language competition. In the long run, the fact that Ethiopia was forced to face its problems at an early stage may prove advantageous, even though it is presenting some trying difficulties at the moment.

From a global perspective, most of Ethiopia's problems seem almost ordinary. From Quebec to India, from Belgium to Indonesia, and from Peru to Sri Lanka nearly all the linguistic problems that Ethiopia has experienced and is experiencing have been faced and in many cases at least partially solved by some country or other. Unfortunately, the study of such problems so far has been fragmented across disciplines and across geographical specialities. The time is certainly ripe for a consolidation of the fragmentary studies that we now have. The time is also ripe to make at least tentative moves towards some general theoretical framework for the study of societal multilingualism.

A FUNCTIONAL VIEW OF LANGUAGE IN SOCIETY

Important insights can be gained into linguistic and ethnic conflict in society by evaluating the language situation of a society against the functions of language under normal conditions. Several formulations and taxonomies have been proposed concerning the functions of language in society (Penalosa 1981). A lean general purpose taxonomy of functions that I have used to great benefit over the years to investigate and to teach about issues in the sociology of language is the tripartite division into

the a) instrument, b) symbolic, and c) cognitive functions of language (Eastman 45-49; Fishman 268ff; 439ff; 564ff). Within this general scheme matters of language conflict, issues of language policy, and remedial measures can be logically and clearly related to each other as displayed in the synopsis presented in Table II.

Table II.
Synopsis of the social functions of language*

Instrumental	Symbolic	Cognitive
• Serves as a vehicle for communication of ideas, sentiments, and “speech acts” • Gives access to information and education at public and private levels. Thus, has hard political and economic implications	• Serves as a symbol of group identity independently of its instrumental and cognitive functions	• As a tool of thinking, strongly influences our perception and evaluation of the physical and social worlds

Benefits Under Conditions of Proper Functioning

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unhampered flow of information at all levels• Smooth operation of social, educational, and political processes• Equal opportunity in education, employment, justice, health, and other public services | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Language becomes a positive symbol and encourages respect among groups• Fosters pride and solidarity in one’s group and promotes loyalty to the larger group• Adds cultural richness and variety to a larger group | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provides useful simplification of complex reality• Is an indispensable tool for all intellectual activity• Language diversity fosters alternate world-views |
|--|--|---|

Problems Under Conditions of Language Conflict

- Barriers to the smooth flow of information at all levels
- Disruption of social, educational and political processes
- Inequality in access to public services
- No growth and possible decrease in inter-group communication
- Language becomes a negative symbol
- Encourages arrogance, prejudice and discrimination on the part of dominant group
- Fosters self-rejection, low self-esteem, protest and even rebellion on the part of dominated groups
- Distorts our understanding of reality
- Promotes sexist, racist and other biases
- Facilitates manipulative propaganda (commercial, political, etc.). Fosters a "lingocentric" world view, in the absence of linguistic delivery diversity

Control Measures For Negative Consequences

- Bilingual education programs
- "Foreign" language training
- Providing multilingual services
- Linguistic autonomy for territorially aggregated minorities
- Language corpus planning for non-standard language
- Fostering public awareness of inherent value and equality of all languages
- Tolerance, respect, and support for all languages and their associated cultures
- Also the measures enumerated in column to the left
- Public education on the potentials and hazards of the linguistic "restructuring" of reality
- Encouragement of foreign language learning to broaden and enrich the world-view

Note: "Language" as used here refers both to dialects and languages.

The usefulness of such a framework of analysis can be further enhanced by imposing on it a distinction between "status" and "corpus" issues. Status issues are those having to do with the legal/political standing of languages in a society. Whether a language is proscribed, restricted, merely tolerated, encouraged, or actively promoted and cultivated is an issue of

language status. Corpus issues relate to matters such as script development and reform and the systematic standardization and lexical expansion of a language for purposes of meeting the needs of a modernizing society.

The instrumental and the symbolic functions of language have come much to the fore with the coming of the modern state.

LANGUAGE IN THE MODERN STATE

1. The Instrumental Role

There have been important changes in the nature of the state in the modern era that have had repercussions on the role of language in society. Formerly, the major duties of the state were to exact tribute, maintain domestic order, and provide for the defense against foreign aggression. In other words the pre-modern state provided few if any social services (such as education, health, welfare, postal service, etc.). It had no mass media, no extensive bureaucracy, and no professional, national standing army. The modern state, by contrast, is highly invasive and has all the above services and regulatory mechanisms. It needs to use a language to discharge the associated duties effectively. The speakers of the language that is used for those purposes gain an enormous advantage over those who do not. The common interest fostered among native speakers of a language by the sentimental and psychological bonds of that language is greatly enhanced by these common practical interests arising from the instrumental function of language.

Language thus becomes central to group interests in the modern state. It becomes highly politicized in the communication-intensive society of today. Language in a modern society has come to be one of the most important avenues to social, economic, and political power, and, by extension, to social prestige as well. The converse of this phenomenon is that the speakers of the language or languages that do not enjoy the prestige of official recognition often become victims of prejudice and suffer from low self-esteem. In a truly equitable society no one would be handicapped by language and no one would gain an unfair advantage over others by language.

In Ethiopia, the rise of Amharic and the relative marginalization of other languages in the 20th century has led to

serious sociopolitical inequities among ethnic groups. Access to resources and to power, influence, and voice on policy formation have been helped or hampered by ethnolinguistic identity and all that it implies. Indeed, admittance into the ranks of the “power elite” has to be preceded by a sound command of the Amharic language and a thorough assimilation into the Amhara culture. Many ethnic slurs are based on the inarticulateness or the heavy accent of the non-speaker or poor speaker of Amharic. “*Tebtabba X*” or “*afun yalfetta Y*” (“stammering X” and “tongue-tied Y”), where X and Y represent ethnic groups, are still common insults against non-dominant ethnic groups.

A steady and sharp rise in the internal flow of information through the press, the broadcast media, the literature, and the bureaucratic system has been considered by some political scientists to be a necessary concomitant of the modernization of nations (Deutsch 1953). This brings with it pressures for a shift to more widely understood languages for written and other formal public communication. We may, for instance, find a shift from an old classic to a modern vernacular (witness the shift from Latin to contemporary vernaculars in Europe, and from Ge’ez to Amharic in Ethiopia); from a diglossic “high” to a diglossic “low” (e.g., in modern Greece; see Ferguson, 1959, for terms); from one major vernacular to several regional vernaculars (India, the former U.S.S.R, and current pressures in Ethiopia, Nigeria, etc.). This tendency can be considered a process in linguistic democratization. Similar changes occurred at the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation and in its subsequent history. The contemporary pressures in the Baltic States for the restoration of the indigenous languages to the status of sole official languages (and for the concurrent demotion of Russian) show the central role of language in the deployment of political power.

2. The Symbolic Role

Aside from its purely instrumental role, language plays an important role as a marker of identity. An ancient Biblical story (Judges 12:6) relates how the Gileadites used a phonetic feature in the speech of the Ephraimites (use of *s* for *sh* as in *sibboleth* for *shibboleth*) as positive identification. Language, even in its minute dialectal variation is, for better or for worse,

an identity marker that we cannot shed easily. The linguistically marked identity may be regional, social-class based, ethnic, religious, or otherwise. Ethnicity itself may be defined by region, "race," religion, or culture; most characteristically, however, ethnicity is defined by language. Attitudes about ethnic groups often transform themselves into attitudes about their languages and dialects and vice versa (Lambert 1967).

The biases that this can generate about minorities and their languages are obvious. Such biases can poison people's attitudes about their own and other people's ethnicity and language. For instance, the Oromo of Ethiopia and other minorities had their collective ego so bruised by the mainstream culture that until recently most of the urbanized, social-climbing Oromos were too embarrassed to use their own language or to admit their true ethnicity.

The primacy of ethnicity in the Ethiopian conflict both historically and currently is a fact that would be acknowledged by most knowledgeable observers. Historically, ethnicity was typically defined by religion (as in the ceaseless Christian/Muslim wars of the "Solomonides" and the "Walasma" in Medieval Ethiopia) and sometimes (as in the case of the conflict with the Oromos in the late sixteenth century) by a "coterminal linguistic and cultural complex," as was so ably described by Aleqa Bahrey around 1600 (Beckingham & Huntingford 1954). Currently, ethnicity is almost exclusively defined by language. The ascendancy of language as a definer of ethnicity globally is related to the changes in the nature of the state as discussed earlier in this paper.

The Ethiopian military regime had a linguistic/ethnic policy that was deceptively forward-looking at the rhetorical level, but the reality behind it was highly disappointing. The literacy campaign which was so often flaunted as a major accomplishment of the glorious revolution, for instance, is found to be a major exercise in window dressing without any concurrent ethnic policy reforms, as discussed above. Besides, in the absence of any economic development, whatever literacy skills were acquired proved useless and in most cases evaporated.

3. The Cognitive Role

Thinkers since the earliest times have pointed out the role of specific languages as diffractive lenses through which we view

the world around us, and the role of different views that are presented to the mind by different languages. The first fully explicit formulations of this thesis come with the works of Christian Herder in the 18th century and Wilhelm von Humboldt in the 19th century. Even bolder statements of the thesis with a measure of empirical support from fieldwork came in the early 20th century in the works of Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir. Although the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis (or the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, as it is often called) has had a checkered career, ranging from enthusiastic acceptance to chilly skepticism on the part of the scholarly community, it is a hypothesis that refuses to go away. Suffice it to say for our purposes here that the issue of the interface between “language, thought, and reality” (to use Whorf’s well-known phrase) continues to appear in various guises and to intrigue us endlessly. It has, among other things, provided the rationale for conservationist arguments with respect to languages that are under threat of extinction. More relevant to our concerns here is the claim that children who cannot receive at least their early education in their home language suffer a psychological, especially a cognitive handicap, and that native language education must be considered a basic right of any child (UNESCO 1953).

The importance of this argument for language policy is that the number of speakers of a particular language is irrelevant to the issue of preserving the language, be it for conservationist reasons or for use in early education. If we had only purely instrumental considerations to cope with, we could find more economical ways of extending education to ethnolinguistic groups falling below a specified number of speakers. With the cognitive argument in view, everyone must be reached in his/her own language. Under these conditions Ethiopia would have to think in terms of coping with over 90 languages and not (as we have implied above) with a mere 23 in isolating only those languages with 50,000 or more speakers. Comparable dilemmas would have to be faced by other highly multilingual African nations.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES WITH SPECIAL STATUS

Amharic, aside from being the constitutionally established official language, is also the language with the largest number of native speakers. Some would dispute this claim and award that

distinction to Oromo, but there is no way to resolve that dispute in the absence of a national census. Few would dispute, however, that if we included all speakers (i.e., native and non-native), Amharic probably would have the highest number of speakers of all languages in Ethiopia. The area over which Amharic is spoken covers the provinces of Wollo, Begemdir, Gojjam, Shoa, the highland areas of Harerge, and all of urban Ethiopia except for Eritrea. Yet, despite this large extension, Amharic is surprisingly free from dialectal variation. Such homogeneity may be attributable to the fact that, as the *lingua franca* of a highly mobile imperial army, Amharic did not suffer the fragmentation and isolation that other areally extended languages did. By comparison, Afan Oromo and even Tigrigna manifest extensive dialectal differentiation.

Oromo also plays the role of *lingua franca* in the southern and southwestern parts of Ethiopia, especially among speakers of other Cushitic languages. Differences between extreme dialects, however, can be so substantial as to seriously hamper intelligibility. This is always an issue of great importance when one has to choose an appropriate dialect for use in broadcasting or for the spread of literacy. The development of a standardized variety is a task that still lies in the future for Oromo. It would seem most likely that the Wollega variety will constitute the base of the future standard. Oromo is currently used on radio, but the only publication other than religious literature so far has been the newspaper *Barrissa* which got into political trouble with the defunct military government and lost its editor to the insatiable jails of Ethiopia.

Tigrigna too, like Amharic and Oromo, plays the role of a regional *lingua franca* for a significant number of non-natives around the periphery of its home base in the Tigray province and on the highlands of Eritrea. This includes many speakers of Bilen, Tigre, Afar-Saho, Agaw, and Amharic (the last, mostly in Northern Begemdir). After Ge'ez and Amharic, Tigrigna has been a written language for longer than any other Ethiopian language. The quantity of printed material in Tigrigna is second only to that of Amharic. In fact, the first newspaper ever produced in an Ethiopian language was written in Tigrigna (Ullendorff 1960). The degree of standardization of Tigrigna is very high because the language has been used as a medium of instruction now for over half a century. The Eritrean liberation

movements have done an impressive job of producing teaching material in Tigrigna, including a major trilingual dictionary in Tigrigna, English, and Arabic. This dictionary includes a substantial amount of new terminology that has been developed to meet the needs of modernization in sciences, technology, and in socialist ideology (Rice 1985).

Ge'ez is now demoted from its age-old role as the literary language of Ethiopia's Orthodox Church; its importance for the society at large lies in the fact that it is also the storehouse for the lexical innovation needed by Tigrigna and Amharic to meet modern needs. Ge'ez has, of course, also bequeathed its writing system to the other Ethiopian languages. Some Oromos have rejected this heritage as being symbolic of Amhara domination and preferred instead to promote the Latin script for Oromo (Demoz 1983, p. 344).

As for the other Ethiopian languages, their chief promoters in the past have been foreign missionaries, who as a matter of policy have long favored the use of vernacular languages for religious instruction and basic education. The totality of the written material for Ethiopian languages other than the major ones mentioned above consists of mostly scriptural and some literacy material. Four Ethiopian languages (Ge'ez, Amharic, Tigrigna, and Oromo) have the Bible, and according to a report in "Ethnologue" (Grimes 1978), three others have only the New Testament, nine have only portions of the scriptures, and as many as nineteen have some scriptural translation work in progress.

NON-INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN ETHIOPIA

English has enjoyed the *de facto* status of a second official language in Ethiopia since the ousting of the Fascist Italian occupation forces, with British assistance, in 1941. All legislation is published in parallel columns in English and Amharic in the *Negarit Gazeta*, the official organ for the publication of new laws. English is taught as a subject in all schools from the third grade on and is the medium of instruction for most subjects in all government secondary education. It is used in the press (a major daily paper and a number of magazines) and on radio and television broadcasts for a few hours each day (see McNab for details). By far the largest number of young Ethiopians who went abroad for higher education went to English-speaking

countries until the mid-1970s. Since then, because of changes in the political alignment of the government, a substantial number of students have gone to Eastern Bloc countries (mostly the former U.S.S.R.), but did so reluctantly and in many cases managed to somehow find their way to the West. All in all, English, even today, remains the most important non-indigenous language in Ethiopia. Even so, its influence in Ethiopia can in no way be compared to its influence in former British colonial possessions.

French was the prime European language in Ethiopia before the Italo-Ethiopian war. It was the European language that Emperor Haile-Selassie and most of his appointees were most comfortable with. Terminology relating to government and bureaucracy, to science, and to other aspects of "modern" life during this era was borrowed liberally from French. In the post-war period, French influence continued mainly through one organ, the Lycée Guebremariam, a French-medium school that operates to this day and continues to attract a small but significant portion of the elite in Addis Abeba, thus ensuring a continued presence for *francophone*, albeit on a small scale. The other small source of a francophonic presence is the Franco-Ethiopian railway, which connects Addis Abeba to the Red Sea port of Djibouti, which still carries a significant component of Ethiopia's foreign trade. French has very limited use in broadcasting and the press in Ethiopia.

Arabic owes its important status in Ethiopia to two major factors: one is Ethiopia's physical proximity to Arabophone countries, and the other is the prevalence and rising importance of Islam in Ethiopia. Islam entered Ethiopia not long after its rise in Arabia. The spread of Islam and prevalence of Koranic schools has assured Arabic a place at least as a religious language. Trade contacts with the Arabian peninsula and the Sudan and immigration into Ethiopia before the oil boom especially from Hejaz, Hadramawt, and Yemen have had the effect of spreading Arabic into many parts of Ethiopia as a *lingua franca* (Ferguson 1970). In Eritrea, Muslim attachment to Arabic is very strong, stronger perhaps than their attachment to their own native lowland languages. During the U.N.-established Eritrean-Ethiopian Federation (1952-1962), Arabic and Tigrigna were the official languages of Eritrea. And in the 1989 Ethiopian-Eritrean peace talks, Arabic was one of the official

languages at the insistence of the Eritrean delegation.

Italian is a language that has seen better days in Ethiopia and especially in the former Italian colony of Eritrea (1890-1941). With the decline of the Italian community in Ethiopia, both in numbers and in influence, the role of the Italian language has waned sharply. However, its historical role and the presence now of a large community of Ethiopian immigrants and refugees in Italy will continue to make Italian one of the more important foreign languages in Ethiopia.

OUTSTANDING POLICY ISSUES

Language Status Issues

A number of questions with respect to the relative status of at least the most widely used ten or fifteen languages need to be raised, publicly debated, and satisfactorily resolved. In the case of Ethiopia some of these questions are: Is it necessary to legally establish one official or national language for the whole country? If so, which should that language be and why? By what procedure should such a selection be made? What concessions should be made to the speakers of languages other than the official one to make up for the handicap they suffer in not having their native language raised to the level of official/national language? What should the role and status of the other languages be once a national language has been officially declared? Is there a role for regional official languages and what should these languages be and what regions should each cover? Is there any need for an officially recognized role for non-indigenous languages, and, if so, what should the roles be?

So far in Ethiopia, the matter of language policy has not received open public discussion. It seems to be a topic sealed by a strong taboo among Ethiopians both inside and outside the country. The policy of the "Marxist" military government in this respect was nothing but an implicit continuation of the policies of the imperial regime which preceded it, with a certain amount of modification in theory but not in practice. Thus Amharic remains the official/national language by constitutional fiat, but other Ethiopian languages may be used, according to the former military regime, for literacy instruction and for limited broadcasting. The Language Academy, first established by the imperial regime for the promotion of Amharic, has

now been charged with the responsibility of producing teaching materials in the several languages that are being used for literacy instruction. As yet, there are no independent evaluations of the success of the use of vernaculars in literacy work.

Occasional discussions of the language issue by Ethiopians outside of Ethiopia reveal two basic fears that motivate people to hold on to the familiar old policies of imperial Ethiopia in matters of language. The greater by far of the two fears is the fear of ethnic fragmentation and conflict if a liberal language policy should allow the development of languages other than Amharic; the second is the fear of the enormous financial costs of implementing a multilingual policy in education and other aspects of national life. Upon closer examination these two fears appear groundless. With respect to the fragmentation issue, it has been quite plain for some time now that it is the intolerance of ethnic and linguistic diversity rather than its acceptance and promotion that has generated fragmentation and conflict in Ethiopia. In any case, there has been precious little unity to protect in Ethiopia for many decades now. As for the economic costs, it is now sadly obvious that the costs in human and material terms far exceeds the limited economic costs of producing teaching materials and personnel in a number of vernaculars. The arguments for a linguistically pluralist policy seem to grow stronger as time goes by, be it in Ethiopia, elsewhere in Africa, or any other place in the world.

CORPUS ISSUES

Once the issues of language status are settled, the language planner's attention must turn to matters of language corpus, i.e., to questions of language standardization, lexical expansion, script development, and reform where necessary to enable the language or languages chosen to adequately meet the needs of a modern society and especially those of the educational system. About the possibility of such intervention and the high probability of its success there is no longer any doubt. We have many examples of the dramatic success of such intervention. Perhaps the best known is the case of Hebrew, a language which was "dead" for about two thousand years but was deliberately resuscitated to become the language of modern Israel. The language was then developed chiefly under the guidance of the Hebrew Language Academy to the point where today

university courses in all branches of the sciences are routinely taught in Hebrew at the universities in Israel. The only two languages in Ethiopia that have undergone extensive developments in language corpus are Amharic and Tigrigna. Both are used as media of instruction and in the press and broadcasting. Amharic is the more extensively standardized and "modernized" of the two. It has been used in the school system for a longer period, and many more school textbooks with glossaries of new terms have been developed in Amharic than in any other language in the country. Many of the terms coined for the textbooks have now entered the general vocabulary of the younger speakers of Amharic (Demoz 1968, McNab 1989). Another major area of lexical development has been the promulgation in Amharic of a body of laws based on continental law (Vanderlinden 1966). The extent to which such a lexical expansion also ushers in important epistemological changes remains to be carefully studied by interdisciplinary teams (Beckstrom 1973, Bureau n.d.).

After textbooks and legislation, the other main avenue of lexical innovation had been manuals for political indoctrination following the "socialist revolution" of 1974. Developments in Tigrigna have paralleled those in Amharic. Tigrigna textbooks and the weekly Tigrigna newspaper played an important role during the ten years of the British Military Administration. After that, the educational and propaganda efforts of the liberation movements were an important agent for standardization and lexical expansion in Tigrigna. Recently an important Tigrigna-English-Arabic dictionary has been published by the Research and Information Center in Eritrea, the research arm of the liberation forces (Rice 1985). In other languages of Ethiopia, corpus development has been very limited and has consisted mainly of whatever little was done by missionaries using vernaculars for early education.

THE LANGUAGE ACADEMY

After a gestation period of several decades, a National Academy of the Amharic Language was finally established by Order Number 79, which was published in the *Negarit Gazeta* on June 27, 1972. It was thus not able to accomplish a great deal during the reign of its creator, Emperor Haile-Selassie, who was ousted not long after the establishment of the Academy.

Nearly a decade later, the Academy, now renamed Academy of Ethiopian Languages, played an important role in the preparation of literacy training material in several major Ethiopian languages for the national literacy campaign that was launched by the military government. In connection with this, the Academy appears to have done a considerable amount of work especially in the lexical expansion of Amharic (McNab 91). Glossaries and dictionaries have been prepared on Marxist-Leninist terminology and on science and technology. For Amharic, the Academy's work on lexical expansion builds upon earlier efforts by various individual institutions, chiefly the Ministry of Education. For the other languages, with the exception of Tigrigna, relatively little has been accomplished in lexical expansion within the Academy or outside of it. Tigrigna, however, has had its natural champions in the liberation fronts, especially the EPLF, which, through its research organ has, among other publications, issued a trilingual (Tigrigna-English-Arabic) dictionary that includes a large number of neologisms.

LANGUAGES IN ETHIOPIA IN THE YEAR 2000

The year 2000, which seems psychologically so remote, is in fact less than ten years away. If any radical changes are to be expected, the seeds of those changes must already be with us. Even so, it is difficult to say what the situation will be ten years from now. What a risky business prediction can be in human affairs will be fully appreciated by those who have observed Ethiopia over the past decade and a half and those who have observed Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s. The observations below are therefore more in a prescriptive than a predictive mode. They try to describe a realistic scenario that would best serve the longterm interest of Ethiopia and Ethiopians.

In view of the limited recognition that had finally been given by the military government to a number of major languages other than Amharic, it would seem reasonable to expect that the process of linguistic democratization will be extended to cover all the remaining languages whose speakers have any interest in preserving them for instrumental or for symbolic reasons. This might eventually mean between thirty and forty languages to be used in basic education. Some of the major lan-

guages (possibly Oromo, Tigrigna, and Somali) could be regional media of instruction through the 12th grade of high school and important regional mass media languages. Given present trends, Amharic should be the medium of instruction for many subjects at the university level. It will most probably remain the most important *lingua franca* in the country, irrespective of whether it is the legally designated "official" or "national" language. As for academic research attention, it should be extended to all Ethiopian languages without exception, irrespective of speaker numbers or speaker interest.

The languages that are now being used only for basic education should move up the educational scale to cover instruction at least through 8th grade (except for the few recommended above for use through 12th grade) and be far more extensively used on regional media than they are now.

The question that looms large in most people's thinking when they contemplate such large-scale linguistic democratization is: "Where will the manpower and material resources to implement such an undertaking come from?"

To my mind, the answer to this question is another question: "Where will the manpower and material resources come from to finance the violent inter-ethnic conflict of the kind that has raged in Ethiopia literally for decades?" It is true, of course, that linguistic democratization alone will not guarantee the end of civil strife anywhere, but it will certainly go a long way to remove some of its most important causes.

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Highlighting Ethiopian Traditional Literature

Getatchew Haile



I. INTRODUCTION

Some of my compatriots, though they have not had the opportunity to examine closely Ethiopia's literary heritage, have nevertheless formed extreme opinions of its value. Some of them believe that we, as an ancient nation, possess the most authentic and original biblical tradition, while others maintain that we have nothing more than a collection of legends and incredible miracles of saints. However, as the present state of the research in Ge'ez literature witnesses, we have neither the former nor only the latter. What we do have is a written tradition that deserves the attention of literary scholars and historians.

Our literary tradition is one that contains both original works and translations from foreign sources. Medieval Ethiopia was a country surrounded by nations with little or no literary traditions. Our ancestors, therefore, received little inspiration from their neighbors. The road to the nearest region where lit-

erature flourished, the Christian Orient, was as perilous as one can imagine. Many Ethiopians perished at the hands of highwaymen and religious enemies, fell prey to wild animals, or succumbed to the stings of scorpions and other poisonous insects while travelling to that part of the world in search of inspiring ideas.

Despite these geographical difficulties, Ethiopians did gain access to some foreign knowledge. Always striving to learn more about Christianity, Ethiopians never abated their trek to the north. The road from Ethiopia to Egypt, Cyprus, the Holy Land, and (sometimes) Armenia was littered with the relics of these persistent and stubborn Ethiopians. As recently as 1955, I met personally Ethiopian monks in Cairo who told me that they had journeyed from Ethiopia to Cairo on foot, walking through the Sudan. The early monks lived in monasteries, some of which were their own, in these foreign countries and came back with books which they then translated into Ge'ez. Ethiopia also received Middle Eastern books through the metropolitan of the Ethiopian Church, its spiritual head. From 330 A.D. to 1951 A.D., the metropolitan was a Copt, one of the Egyptian Christians with whom Ethiopians shared close ties. Whenever a new metropolitan arrived, Ethiopians were introduced to the new books he and his retinue brought with them.

This paper is a brief survey of the highlights of the literature created by these early monks. I begin with literature of foreign origin, then discuss information about the eras and authors responsible for our tradition.

II. TRANSLATED LITERATURE

The content of Ge'ez literature is generally religious. Works translated from foreign sources include biblical scriptures, exegeses, service books of the Coptic Church, texts detailing the lives of saints of the Universal Church who flourished before the schism at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. and of saints of the Coptic Church, especially the Desert Fathers, and homilies by the early church Fathers, such as John Chrysostom, Athanasius of Alexandria, Severus of Antioch, and Cyril of Alexandria.

Some maintain that such translations have added little or no value to world literature. There is something to this position: it is better to read such texts in the original; for serious

scholarly research, it is necessary to study any work in its original, rather than in its English, Ge'ez, or Latin translation. However, the original versions of many important works are, unfortunately, not extant. From time to time, an original work as well as the copies of it disappear without a trace. Therefore, any language that preserves a version of non-extant work, especially if that work is of some significance, is tremendously important.

The importance of Ethiopia's literature of foreign origin has been acknowledged for precisely this reason. Ge'ez translations have preserved in their entirety at least the *Book of Enoch* (on eschatology), the *Book of Jubilees* (on the sabbaths) and the *Ascension of Isaiah*. Biblical scholars have identified these books as part of the corpus of the inter-testamental literature, i.e., "biblical" books that fall, chronologically, between the Old and New Testaments. The books were not known to the authors of the books of the Old Testament, but should have been known to the authors of the books of the New Testament. For example, St. Jude (New Testament) in his Epistle (verses 14-15) quotes the *Book of Enoch*: "And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgement upon all; and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him." For centuries, non-Ethiopian biblical scholars were unable to identify the source of Jude's quote because his source scripture, the *Book of Enoch*, was not contained in their Bible of 66 books. For Ethiopian scholars, whose Bible contains 81 books, including one "by Enoch," locating this quote in Enoch 1:9 was not a problem. When fragments of Enoch were found in Latin and Greek and now in Aramaic among the Qumran collection of manuscripts, Western scholars accepted the credibility of our tradition. They have since studied Enoch vigorously and have translated it into their languages.

There are many other similar Ethiopian contributions. For example, a certain John was the bishop of Nikiou (Egypt) when Egypt was invaded by the Arabs in 642 A.D. He wrote an eyewitness account of the invasion. No other contemporary Christian author is known to have written such an important historical account of the event. Sadly enough, however, no copy

of the bishop's book has survived. Fortunately, it was translated into Ge'ez before it was lost. Now it has been translated into English, from the Ge'ez.

III. LOCAL ORIGINAL LITERATURE

Like all other Christian communities of the world, especially communities of the Christian Orient, Ethiopia produced its own Christian literature. Our books were written to deal with the concrete problems Ethiopian teachers faced when they tried to spread Christianity, and to articulate possible solutions. Ethiopian scholars also witnessed and recorded many historical events. The experiences of early Ethiopian Christians are similar to the experiences of Christian communities in other parts of the Christian world: in all of these communities, the literature grew in response to such problems. Although not as complete and in as much detail as we would have liked, Ethiopian scholars have left us extensive records. These records, therefore, are integral parts of the history of Christianity; they must be treated as such.

A. Problems of Preservation

In all communities, some books survive the ravages of time while others die out. The situation among Ethiopian Christians seems to be no different. For example, not all the books quoted by the author of the *Kibre Negest* are known to us in their Ge'ez versions today. We do not know if the author of the *Kibre Negest* took the quotes from the lost Ge'ez versions or from versions in other languages. Enrico Cerulli, a famous Italian scholar, has encountered a similar situation in his study of the work *Mezmure Kristos*. The Ethiopian author of this work quotes from a book entitled *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*, a collection of tales from India translated from Arabic into many languages. To this day, we have not found a Ge'ez version of *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*. Cerulli's question was, "Did this work, so well known and so widespread, ever appear in Ethiopic literature, and if so, from what sources?" Cerulli concluded that the author of *Mezmure Kristos* instead quoted from another source with similar tales, the Ge'ez version of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, also of Indian origin. The author's marginal notes claiming that he quoted *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* were, according to Cerulli, nothing

more than "*ad pompam*" (that is, designed to boast that he had read *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* as well).

Although it is true that a Ge'ez version of the *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* has not been discovered, we have not searched all Ethiopian monasteries, the depositories of Ge'ez manuscripts, and so cannot be certain that no such version exists. Moreover, we know, as said above, that in all cultures books occasionally disappear over the course of time. Therefore, it is possible that the author of the *Mezmure Kristos* had access to a Ge'ez version of *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* before it was lost. Significantly, I have seen its title listed in an inventory of books donated to a church by a dignitary.

The book of *Joseph and Asenath* has similarly been quoted in some Ge'ez works. Asenath was the daughter of an Egyptian priest of the Egyptian god, On. Her father gave her to the Hebrew patriarch Joseph in marriage when the latter took over the administration of the Egyptian kingdom. A legend was later produced to absolve the girl of her pagan background, in order that Joseph, a man of the chosen people of God, could be considered to have married a believer in the Almighty God. This legend was then translated into many languages. Abba Giyorgis of Gasecha, a scholar who flourished in the 15th century, has quotations from the legend in his book entitled *Metsihafe Mistir*. However, to this day, *Joseph and Asenath* is not known in its Ge'ez version. Did Giyorgis read it in a foreign language? Although that is plausible, as we quote English or other sources when we write in Amharic, the more likely explanation is that he had access to a Ge'ez version that later disappeared. Again, like the *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*, I have seen its title listed in an inventory of books belonging to a church. These pieces of information relating to the possible existence of a Ge'ez version of the legend are now included in a study by a German scholar, Chr. Burchard, on the different versions of the legend.

It is quite plausible that Ge'ez versions of books could have disappeared from the Ethiopian churches, like *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* and *Joseph and Asenath*. Once a book is composed, or translated from another language, copies of it were made by scribes for different churches and monasteries. The copying was sometimes ordered by the churches who needed copies, other times by dignitaries who wanted to be remem-

bered by the clergy in prayer with such books. The greatest interest was, therefore, in copying service books that were used regularly in church services, e.g., The Psalter (*Dawit*), Missals (*Metsihafe Qiddase*), and baptismal and funeral rituals (*Metsihafe Kristinna* and *Metsihafe Ginzet*), rather than works that were read occasionally and then only by the few scholars. Service books were used very often, some even daily; and when overused, they were replaced by new copies. The old ones were either thrown away or kept in the storehouse, *iqa bet*. Books such as *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* or *Joseph and Asenath* are not service books, so were unlikely to be repeatedly recopied. Thus, if a church that owned the only copy of such a book burned down either accidentally during a nighttime candle service or deliberately by an enemy of the Christian religion, that book would be lost forever. Many churches, built of wood and thatched roofs, perished in this manner along with all artifacts in them.

I mention the problems of preserving a literary heritage to demonstrate that literary activity in Ethiopia was not as slow as it now appears to us. Rather, it is likely that many works, not just *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* or the book of *Joseph and Asenath*, were produced and lost. In fact, it amazes any person who knows the history of the Church and the destruction to which the manuscripts have been exposed that so many manuscripts have survived.

B. Authorship and Periods

It is generally assumed that translation of the Bible into Ge'ez was completed by the end of the fifth century. There are also testimonies to the effect that scholars of later periods were not completely satisfied with the translation they inherited. These scholars occasionally revised their *textus receptus* after comparing it to other versions, e.g., Hebrew or Arabic (for the Old Testament) and Greek or Arabic (for the New Testament). As a result, the Ge'ez biblical manuscripts we have now, copies of different revisions, are slightly different from each other.

The identity of those who translated the Bible and the other books of foreign origin is a point of contention. Some Ethiopicists believe that Syrian and Coptic monks were the translators. Although it is possible that some monks who came

to Ethiopia during the long history of the local Church learned Ge'ez during their sojourn in Ethiopia, it is unlikely that their knowledge of the language had reached such a level that they could translate into it Greek and Arabic works. This assignment was left, I believe, to the Ethiopians. It is easier to translate from a foreign language into one's own than vice versa, especially if one learns the foreign language at an advanced age. Moreover, an examination of the translated texts shows that the translations were done by scholars who knew Ge'ez better than the languages from which the translations were made. Their translating mistakes demonstrate shortcoming in their knowledge of the language of the *Vorlage* (Arabic or Greek), not Ge'ez. Therefore, the translators could not have been Egyptians or Syrians or Armenians or Greeks. Finally, at that time there were more Ethiopians who knew Arabic (the language of the Copts) than Copts and other foreigners who knew Ge'ez.

These Ethiopian authors came from all over the country, as the monasteries were the centers of education. Students, those who intended to be monks as well as those who did not, flocked to these centers. The grammatical mistakes found in some manuscripts reflect this fact; such manuscripts show that our literary heritage is the product of scholars from many linguistic backgrounds, not just Amharic and Tigrignaspeakers.

The decline of Aksum disrupted literary activities. The Zagwe rulers (1137-1270) are famous for the construction of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. As far as literature is concerned, however, no significant work, translated or locally composed, has come from that period. ~~Virtually all of Ethiopia's works of local origin that we have now were created in the~~ period of the so-called Solomonic dynasty. The dynasty was established in 1270 by Yekunno Amlak, a man of modest origin from Qewet, in Shoa. Yekunno Amlak knew, since his childhood, the most important church leaders of the time, Abune Iyyesus Mo'a of Hayq and Abune Tekle-Haymanot of Asbo (Debre Libanos) in Shoa. He may in fact have been a relative of the latter. This acquaintance, people claim, strengthened the bond, for better or worse, between church and state. As a result of this relationship, the Solomonic period was the golden age for Ge'ez literature. Translation from Coptic Arabic was in full swing. (The Copts wrote in Greek and Coptic, a language

descended from Egyptian, until their country, Egypt, was conquered by the Arabs in 642 A.D.)

During this period, a metropolitan by the name of Abba Selama (1348-1388) brought numerous service books to Ethiopia, some of which were translated into Ge'ez. Some sources maintain that Selama's mother was an Ethiopian. In Ethiopia, he is called *Selama Meterguim*, "Selama the Interpreter" or "Selama the Translator." Although some historians believe that this appellation indicates that those books translated into Ge'ez during his metropolitanate were translated by him, the colophons of these books are ambiguous. Some credit the translation to him and some show that he commissioned their translation, or that they were translated from books owned by him. The sole metropolitan for the entire country could hardly have had the time to spend translating books. Furthermore, people of that time and place saw nothing wrong in claiming for oneself, as Selama might have done, the efforts of others who are under one's authority.

C. Prose

The most important non-poetic text from the Solomonic dynasty documents the history of the wars which King Amde Tsiyon (1314-1344), Yikunno Amlak's grandson, conducted. The manuscript containing this text does not look that old, but a study of it by Dillmann, a prominent German scholar of Ge'ez, suggests that it is a copy of the original text composed during the reign of the monarch. This document is very important for several reasons. Among other things, it describes how the king held council(s) in which his lieutenants discussed matters openly, even opposing their monarch's views. It also indirectly shows the size of his kingdom: the document lists (by their titles, not their names) regional rulers who revolted against or resented the king's overlordship, thus, in effect, mapping out the kingdom's administrative system. For example, rulers of many principalities had the title of *niguse* ("king"), while the head of the kings, *ri'ise negest*, was titled *niguse Tsiyon* ("King of Zion"). Tsiyon was the principality of which the center was Aksum. Some historians believe that this document is clear evidence of how Amde Tsiyon expanded Ethiopia's boundaries by military conquest. They arrive at this conclusion by inter-

preting the campaigns as wars of expansion. For others, Amde Tsiyon's wars were expeditions to pacify revolts against his rule. For example, among the regions mentioned as having been "conquered" by Amde Tsiyon is his grandfather's homeland, Tegulet. The document is, therefore, clear evidence that Ethiopia, if it included as many restless "kingdoms" as mentioned in this document, was much larger than present-day historians have depicted.

The 15th century saw the rise of *Retu`a Haymanot* ("[the man] of the Orthodox faith," so called because he did not want to reveal his identity), Abba Giyorgis of Gasecha or of Segla, and Emperor Zer'a Ya`iqob. All three wrote homilies or sermons to be read at the celebration of the different feasts of the year. These homilies are supposed to be admonitions to the faithful, calling them to righteousness. A study of them shows, however, that they are treatises dealing with theological questions which apparently created schisms among the clergy. Most of the heresies treated by Giyorgis in his *Metsihafe Mistir* (to be published soon by Yacob Beyene) are theological and Christological views (Arian, Nestorian, Eutychian) rejected by the Universal Church. Giyorgis may have taken the trouble to write about them at such length because he had seen some of their followers on Ethiopian soil.

The homilies by Zer'a Ya`iqob are explicitly designed to root out local dissensions and dissidents. He refutes the dissident views by mentioning the names of their originators, Istifanos, Gemalyal, Zemika'el, Fire Hiywot, and Atsqa Istifanos, the founder of the Istifanosite "heresy" (the heresy was that he refused to prostrate himself before the icon of Mary and in honor of the person and name of the monarch) was a simple monk, interested not in theology but in the faith in the Trinity and in monastic asceticism. However, judging from the reports about their "heresies," the other scholars were truly highly educated and highly sophisticated intellectuals. It is regrettable that no work ascribed to these articulate scholars has been identified yet. They either did not write or their works were banned, confiscated, or destroyed by order of the palace. There is a note, for example, in one of Emperor Zer'a Ya`iqob's writings bemoaning the fact that some monastic leaders (these are the scholars in question) composed service books for their monasteries. This indicates that some of the scholars may have attempted to leave

us original works. One of the problems which these monastic leaders had with the translated literature with which the king wanted them to be content was that it was not designed to serve the Ethiopian nation. However, the main discord between the king and the scholars was in the interpretation of the Trinity of God. How can God be three and one at the same time? The dissidents' explanation differed radically from the emperor's. Following earlier traditions such as the Book of Clement, the *Qälemantos*, they compared God to one sun which has three features: disc (God the Father), light (God the Son), and heat (God the Holy Spirit). The emperor, following some church Fathers, compared him to three suns (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) whose light is combined to be one (his divinity).

Another of the problems which Zer'a Ya'iqob addressed was Ethiopians' belief in superstition and magical practices. As his *Metsihafe Birhan* (published by Conti Rossini and L. Ricci) and *Tomare Tesbi'it* (to be published soon by this writer) show, he fought these beliefs vigorously, especially because he himself believed in the power of magic. For example, he said that he discovered a plot by dignitaries of his administration, led by his own *bihit wedded*, and receiving help from magicians and soothsayers, to replace him by another ruler.

One of the theological questions which Zer'a Ya'iqob treated in his homilies was the refusal on the part of the "heretics" to believe that God has an image, *melk*. They asked, quoting John 1:18, "Who shall [we] say he looks like, if no one has ever seen him?" The emperor, on the other hand, believed that God looks like man, arguing from Genesis 1:26-27 ("Let us make man in our image [*ar'aya*] and our likeness [*amsal*].... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him..."). He understood *ar'aya* and *amsal* literally, to mean physical *melk*. He could not see that one with a *melk* (hands, legs, ears, etc.) can be limited to the space the *melk* occupies. Most probably he failed to realize this contradiction of the Church's position that God is not limited by space and time because in our tradition saints—creatures and with *melk* as we are—can hear prayers and appear to people at the same time in more than one place.

Zer'a Ya'iqob was at war with the *Ayhud*, "the Jews." A major part of his *Metsihafe Milad* (published by Kurt Wendt) is a ferocious attack on the Jews who denied the incarnation of

the Word of God in the person of Jesus Christ. A question which does not yet have a definitive answer is whether there were Jews (a Jewish community) in Ethiopia or whether the king was labelling as Jewish (*Ayhudawi*) anyone whose Christology differed from his. However, his *Metsihaf Milad* does not leave much room for doubt that he was addressing people who held Jewish views. They may have been neither Falashas nor ethnic Jews directly descended from Palestinian Jews, but the views which the king refuted in his homilies for the Nativity of Christ were clearly Jewish. Finally, it seems unlikely that he would expend so much time and energy refuting a view unless it was a threat to the Christianity of his kingdom. His targets could have been local theologians who reasoned that Judaism has a better understanding of God than Christianity, (e.g., their insistence on comparing God to one sun). In fact one of them, Gemalyal, was accused of addressing Christ and Mary with abusive words.

Zer'a Ya'iqob was also preoccupied with the question of treating Saturday as a holy day. In many Churches, including that of Alexandria, with which the Ethiopian church is closely associated, Saturday as a holy day was superceded by Sunday. The Ethiopian Church, unlike other Churches, accepts the Old and New Testaments as its two breasts which feed the faithful. The number ten (of the commandments of the Old Testament) in Greek and Ge'ez is the initial of Jesus, meaning that none of the commandments should be abrogated. But the mother Church in Alexandria and many monasteries in Ethiopia considered it Jewish to honor Saturday. Nevertheless, Zer'a Ya'iqob was able, through his writings (see his *Metsihafe Milad* and *Metsihafe Birhan*) and other means, to make the Ethiopian Church continue the honoring of Saturday.

Of all his achievements, Zer'a Ya'iqob is remembered most for his mariology (parts of which have been published by Budge and Cerulli and part to be published soon by this writer). The reverence he showed towards Mary, virgin in two ways, in mind and body, virtually elevates her to the status of a goddess. He demanded that the faithful also give her the same extreme reverence. She was personified in every icon of the Madonna and Child that the painters produced and reproduced. Viewing such an icon became tantamount to seeing Mary in person. According to accounts of the miracles of Mary which Zer'a

Ya`iqob (and his father Dawit) introduced to the Church, some of these icons spoke, shed tears, and brought forth sweat. Numerous hymns and prayers to her and her icon were composed. Her miracles came to Ethiopia from most of the Christian world, Spain, France, Palestine, and most of all, Egypt. Zer'a Ya`iqob secretariat occupied itself with translating these miracles from Arabic and with reporting new ones attributed to her in Ethiopia. The translations and original texts were studiously copied and sent to the monasteries of his kingdom to be read just as one would read the Gospel. One sometimes wonders whether reading accounts of Mary's miracles was not regarded as more important than reading the Gospel. For example, if, for some compelling reason, people were unable to partake of Holy Communion, they need only come to church and listen to the deacon read a miracle or two worked by the Blessed Virgin. This, it was taught to the faithful, would be equivalent to taking Holy Communion. Some abbots were deeply troubled by this particular command of the king. They thought that "reading the miracles" would make the monks lax in observing the monastic rules of asceticism and cause them to rely instead on Mary's miraculous ability to bring them to heaven. Refusal to read them, on the other hand, would provoke monarchical rage and expose their monastic communities to reprisal. There are now extant over 600 stories of miracles worked by the Blessed Virgin.

The king ordered 33 feasts to be observed in Mary's honor, some monthly and some annually. This order was more difficult for the peasantry to observe than for the monasteries. The scholars of the time, Gemalyal, Zemika'el, and others, argued that one need not interrupt one's daily work to observe a feast. They maintained that the faithful should go to their work after attending mass in the morning. The emperor was against any work, such as ploughing, cutting wood, grinding grain, on a feast day. He ordered the faithful to spend such days receiving religious instruction, and would confiscate their property if they disobeyed more than once. He quoted the *Sinodos* ("the Apostolic Constitution") in which Sts. Peter and Paul are reported to have said that the faithful should rest from their manual labor on Saturdays and Sundays. He extended the idea of resting to the holy days he instituted, not only in honor of Mary but also the memorial days for the apostles, prophets, saints, martyrs, and

the nine archangels. He wrote homilies, most of which are preserved, in fact, edited or in the process of being edited, to be read to the faithful at the celebrations.

D. Hymnody and Poetry

Poetic hymns are an important part of Ge'ez literature. Ethiopians, including Somali-language speakers on the Horn of Africa, love rhyming and rhythmic compositions. One gets the impression that every other Ethiopian believes that he or she is a born poet. Throughout the literature one finds rhyming hymns in honor of every saint canonized by the church.

Diggua, a huge book of hymns ascribed to St. Yared, a sixth-century Aksumite priest, is a collection of songs that rhyme. I am certain that the ancient tradition which teaches that Yared authored the nucleus of this collection is accurate. But I do not believe, as some of our church teachers do, that the hymns to the saints who lived after St. Yared were also composed by him. I believe the melodies for singing the hymns in the *diggua* are also Yared's. But the notes, the *milikkit*, were invented during the Gonderite era.

The composition of one of the collections of hymns to the saints of the Church called *Igzi'abher Negse* is attributed to King Zer'a Ya'iqob. Each of these hymns of different length is meant to be sung at the commemoration of the saint in whose honor it was composed. There are at least two more collections of this hymnodic genre of literature, one by Abba Giyorgis of Gasecha (15th century) and another by a certain Arke Sillus (who flourished probably in the 17th century). The collection by Arke Sillus, titled *Arke*, has made its way into the Synaxary. The Synaxary is a compendium of short biographies of the saints of the Church. It is like an encyclopedia of saints, martyrs, and archangels, except that the entries are arranged not alphabetically but by the day of the year on which the saint in question is celebrated. Many Synaxary manuscripts conclude an entry with an *Arke* hymn composed in honor of the particular saint. A few Synaxary entries contained only an *Arke* hymn. There was apparently no textual entry for these saints when it was decided to copy all *Arke* hymns into the Synaxary.

In addition to the *Igzi'abher Negse*, Abba Giyorgis composed similar hymns, especially to the Blessed Virgin. Of these,

I would like to quote one from his *Book of Hours* (*Se'atat*). The tentative translation is made for an article on *qine*:

- a. What should we call you, O full of grace?
You are the gate of salvation;
you are the portal of light;
you are the daughter of the palace.
- b. Should we call you heaven?
Your Son is the sun of righteousness;
his Apostles are your stars,
the lamps of your First-Born.
- c. Should we call you a garden?
Your Son is the vine tree;
his Apostles are your vines,
the branches of your First-Born.
- d. Should we call you a ship?
Your Son is the captain;
his Apostles are the crew,
the chosen ones of your First-Born.
- e. Should we call you a castle?
Its builder is your Son;
his Apostles are your household,
the faithful of your First-Born.
- f. Should we call you an altar?
Your Son is a high priest;
his Apostles are your deacons,
the disciples of your First-Born.
- g. Should we call you a golden basket?
Your Son is the bread of life;
his Apostles are your stewards,
the sacrificers of the body of your First-Born.
- h. Should we call you a chalice?
Your Son is the wine of worship;
his Apostles are your priests,
the preparers of the blood of your First-Born.

I would also like to mention the *melki'at*. The *melki'at* are hymns in praise of the parts of the body (*melk*) of the saint, the beauty of his/her hair, the power of his/her arms, the tenderness of his/her heart towards the needy, and so forth. Most *melki'at* are a collection of hymns (normally 36 to 42) of five lines each. It is not certain when this *genre* of literature started. Although the 15th century seems a plausible date, *melki'at* cer-

tainly flourished during the Gonderite dynasty.

Qine also belongs to the hymn *genre* of literature. The basic difference between *qine* poems and other hymns is that *qine* hymns are intended to be used once, at a particular church. For example, a *qine* composed to celebrate the Conception of Mary (the day on which Anne, Mary's mother, conceived Mary) at the church of Aksum Tsiyon cannot be used at any other occasion, not even at another celebration of her Conception, at the church of Aksum Tsiyon or any other church. It is a "disposable" hymn. Some of these poems are really quite beautiful; in recent years some scholars (such as Hiruy Welde-Sillassie and Admassu Jembere) and institutions (such as the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Abeba University and the Academy of Languages of the Ministry of Cultures and Sports) have collected them to preserve for posterity.

Qine poems, composed by different scholars in turn, and sung in church by a designated singer (the composer of *qine* lyrics is different from the ceremonial singer) as part of the liturgy are religious hymns praising God and extolling the saints. Psalm 32 [33]:3, "Sing unto him a new song, play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts," articulates the need for such hymns in the liturgy.

Qine poems can also be panegyrics and eulogies of political and religious authorities. The authority in whose praise the *qine* is composed often rewards the *bale-qine* generously for his exaggerated flattery in such a poem. *Qines* can also be admonitions and castigations that provoke the rage of such personalities. They can be witty and profane remarks, even funny and silly jokes and anecdotes. For example, consider the following introductions of a few *qine* poems:

- A. The content of one *qine* poem is that butter and meat are grateful for the fasting season because it saves them from the furnace of dreadful fire. The joke is based on the fact that one does not cook food with butter or prepare meat during fast seasons.
- B. Mary was honored by both the glory of virginity and, the glory of motherhood, while "Melkon," wife of David, had the glory of neither. The latter knew a man but was barren whereas the former was a virgin and had a child.
- C. One of the many *qine* poems of *Memhir* Yiheyis compares the sex lives of Adam and Lot, and celibacy of Mary. We

know from the Bible (Genesis 19:31-36) that Lot committed incest with his daughters. The poet remarks that Adam's acts should be considered worse than Lot's because Adam married Eve to whom he was father as well as mother; she came from him alone. Lot, at least, was not the mother of those with whom he had slept. Mary, on the other hand, did not know Joseph, even though he was her spouse and he was not related to her in blood.

- D. In one much admired *qine* poem the author emphasizes his astonishment that, at the end of the world, although the moon, fixed in its heavenly place, will be drenched in blood (though it will not be physically wounded, it will bleed), no blood will be seen on the stars that will fall (though they will likely be wounded, they will not bleed). The joke refers to Matthew 24:29, where the Ge'ez version says that, as a sign of the second coming of Christ, the moon will be covered with blood (darken) and the stars will fall from heaven (but will not be covered with blood).
- E. According to the Gospel (Matthew 9:6), Our Lord healed a paralytic who was brought to him on a bed. When Christ healed him, he said to him, "Rise take up your bed and go home." He picked up his bed and left. The author of a *qine* poem personifies that a bed, causing it to say to the paralytic as they left Christ, "Now carry me as I have been carrying you."
- F. One may recall that in the church tradition, Mary is compared to a jar (of water) because her Son, Christ, is called the water of life (John 4: 14-14), a *qine* metaphor in itself. With this in mind, the composer of one *qine* remarks that Anne (the mother of Mary) changed women's custom, because she carried a jar on her belly (in the front) instead of on her back. "Well said, well said; you mean she conceived Mary in her womb!" would be the response of the author's colleagues when they heard the *qine* sung in church during service.

Critics may contend that such jokes trivialize the liturgy, for they sound more like entertainment for the clergy than songs to praise the Most High. One possible answer is that poems lose some qualities when they are translated or paraphrased into another language, as I have done here. However, it is not clear how *qines* such as these could be pleas-

ing to God, even in the language of their composition. The better explanation is that the medium itself, the beauty, sanctity, and difficulty of the Ge'ez in which a *qine* is composed, lends the *qine* message its value.

Every traditional student dreams of mastering *qines*. A scholar with such knowledge is highly respected among (and perhaps feared by) the clergy. I would venture that real education in traditional Ethiopia starts at the *qine* school because this is the place where, for the first time, the students use their analytical minds. Here students are trained to analyze the logical structure of the Ge'ez language; they learn linguistics and Ge'ez grammar. The rest of Ethiopian education, by contrast, requires students to engage in rote memorization. Learning by rote is problematic because students become virtually uneducated the moment they forget what they had memorized during their many school years. Forgetting, of course, is inevitable if one does not have the time to spend reciting occasionally every lesson one has learned in all those years.

The two requirements for composing *qine* are: (a) that the author must observe the rules, the length and number of the lines (which have to rhyme), rhythm, grammar, etc.; and (b) that he must show his power of expression, through choosing the most effective figures of speech. Anyone who observes the rules is certified to compose *qine*. Not many teachers know how to teach these rules; students learn them and compose correct *qines* in the same manner that all of us learned our language and now use it correctly. The teacher corrects for students their beginner's poems just as our mothers once corrected for us our childish language. The highly acclaimed *bale-qine* (poet) is, however, he who excels in his power of expression.

Some traditional scholars believe that God gave *qine* to Ethiopians only; and that no other nation is endowed with this *genre* of literature. This assertion, however, cannot be sustained. *Qine* is a type of Ge'ez poetry; poetry and language are inseparable in any culture. Only the rules of poetry differ from language to language; only in this regard do *qine* poems differ from poems of other nations. As far as poetic expressions — simile, pun, hyperbole, etc. — are concerned, one nation's poetry is not much different from another's.

I would like to close the section on hymns and poems by mentioning my favorite work, the longer *Mezmure Kristos*,

“Psalms of Christ,” written by an anonymous poet who lived probably in the 16th century. This work is an imitation of the *Mezmure Dawit*, “Psalms of David.” The anonymous author of the *Mezmure Kristos* was a well-read scholar. He has “side-notes” (instead of footnotes) and a bibliography, and an impressive one at that! One of his sources, as stated above, was *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*. What fascinates me about this work is its construction. Like the Psalms of David, the *Mezmure Kristos* has 151 psalms. To show the correspondence between the works, each psalm (*mezmur*) of the *Mezmure Kristos* begins with *incipitis* (the first few words) of the corresponding psalm in the Psalms of David. Moreover, the length of each of the 151 psalms is limited to the length of the corresponding psalm in the Psalms of David. Finally, the length of each line in a psalm, that is, the number of letters in each line, reflects the length of the line, that is, the number of letters, in the line of the corresponding psalm in the Psalms of David. All in all, there are exactly as many (Ge’ez) letters in the *Mezmure Kristos* as there are in (Ge’ez) *Mezmure Dawit*. What is more, the author constructed the work according to these strict rules while also making each of the 151 psalms (*mezmurs*) of the *Mezmure Kristos*, a rhyming composition. (Those of the psalms of David are not, at least in the Ge’ez version). Despite all these constraints on the author, the *Mezmure Kristos* is a beautiful Christian Psalter. As a prayer book, I would prefer it to the Psalms of David, had the latter not been recommended by the apostles in the *Sinodos*.

E. *Gedlat*

Internal historical records come to us in two forms, the royal chronicles (*Tarike negest*) and the lives and miracles of saints (the *gedlat*, “Acts of Saints,” and the Synaxary). Generally speaking, historians should write the history of Ethiopia, as Conti Rossini and Taddesse Tamrat have done, utilizing, after critical analysis, these two types of literature (or sources), as well as travellers’ reports and interviews given by Ethiopian travellers to historians outside Ethiopia. All these must be critically analyzed because each reflects a bias: the chronicles were composed by court employees to record the glorious victories of their employers; the *gedlat* by students and followers of the

saint whom they wanted to extoll; the reports recorded by foreign travellers with their particular biases and who may have had as sources Ethiopian travellers determined to impress their audiences.

I find the *gedlat* of Ethiopian saints singularly informative and entertaining. Their Ge'ez is simple: anyone with elementary knowledge of the language can read them with some help from the dictionary. They tell the history of the saints in an Ethiopian setting. They are stories of people whom the saints admonished, of gods and magicians the saints destroyed, and of kings and rulers they castigated or with whom they allied themselves. A few of the *gedlat* and almost all of the known chronicles have been edited in Europe; see especially the series *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (CSCO), now published in Louvain, Belgium.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents neither the history of Ge'ez literature nor surveys its content. Rather, it is a presentation of the background of Ge'ez literature and a call for a balanced and informed evaluation of it. It is a reminder that Ge'ez literature is the product of an isolated community in a small nation; it is the product of a Christian outpost, of a segment of a nation living on the periphery of the Christian world. Foreigners who came to this community inspired its members to write not because they shared new and useful ideas with the indigenous scholars, but because they offensively undermined the local Christian traditions, provoking a wrathful reaction that scholars expressed in writing. The small community had to stand alone, withstanding many devastating assaults, political as well as physical. Under the circumstances, it has done remarkably well.

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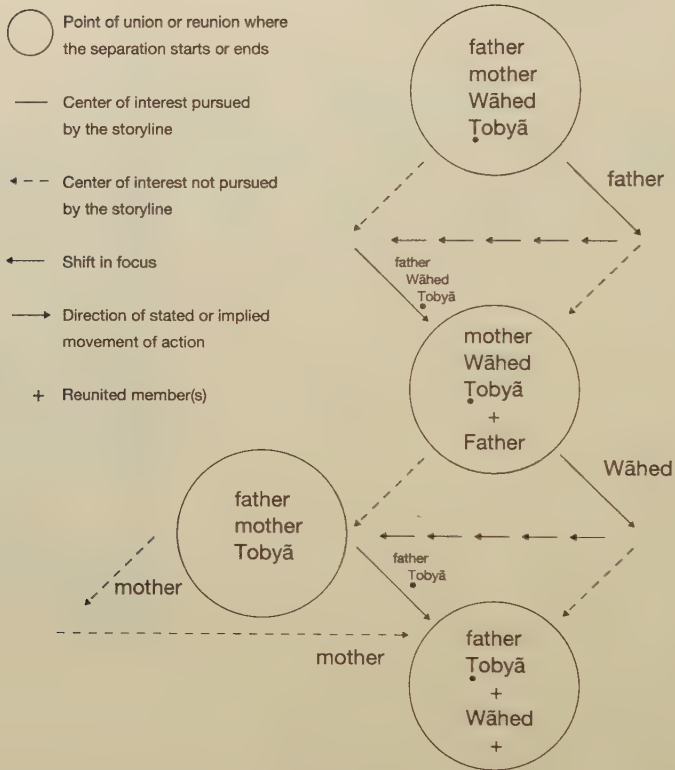
The Form and Content of the First Amharic Novel

Taye Assefa



I

Afawarq Gabrayasus' *Lebb Wallad Tarik (Tobyā)* tells about the fortunes of a Christian family whose homeland is invaded by hostile neighbors who follow another religion. The main action develops through constant shifts in the center of interest. The basic motifs used for framing the plot and regulating the shifts in the center of interest are separation and reunion among the members of the Christian family. The external framework of the action can be diagrammatically represented as follows:



From the narrator's report of the way the war between the two communities begins, we can gather that all the members of the Christian family have been together before the call to arms. But when the Dajāzmāch (a title similar to a general) is sent to the war front and in due course falls into the hands of his enslavers, the story is then fixed on his new life as a slave up to the point where his master proposes to release him. The master makes this proposal because he assumes that since his new slave was previously a man of high standing, his family would be rich enough to pay any price demanded for his liberty. As his offer is hence motivated by a desire for profit and as the Dajāzmāch is in no position to pay the ransom, the storyline reaches a dead end from this angle. So mention of the family as a potential source of help is used as a means of shifting the focus to a new center of interest. The story then develops along this new line for some time, with the narrator presenting details of the identity of the rest of the family and their strenuous efforts to raise the ransom money. When the unknown merchant that Wāhed approaches for a job later secretly pays the ransom and secures the liberty of the Dajāzmāch, this benevolent act also paves the way for the second separation.

The first reaction of both the Dajāzmāch and Wāhed when they realize the source of the ransom money is a strong feeling of indebtedness to the merchant. They take themselves to be morally bound at least to express their gratitude to their benefactor. Consequently Wāhed sets out on this mission. This separation occurs immediately after the first one is over, for Wāhed starts his search for the generous merchant on the very next day of his father's return home. The focus of the story then follows Wāhed up to the point where he in turn is enslaved. Since all that Wāhed could now do is to passively wait in the hope of one day being reunited with his parents, this signals to the reader the blocking of this line of development and a shift in focus to another center of interest.

During the whole year of Wāhed's absence, it seems nothing eventful has occurred at home. All that the narrator reports when the focus shifts to the rest of the family is that they have been anxiously waiting for his return home. When the Dajāzmāch eventually decides to look for his lost son, this desire for reunion generates the third separation in the family,

i.e., the journey that the father and Tobyā embark on, leaving behind the mother. As before, the focus dwells on those three at home very briefly, only for the short time taken up by the discussions and preparations for the journey. Once these are over, the focus is fixed on the two travellers. The plot develops along this storyline until the final reunion and the royal marriages.

Commenting on this reunion, Fikre Tolossa in his Ph.D. dissertation, "Realism and Amharic Literature," claims that "all becomes well for all except for the general's wife whose whereabouts is completely forgotten by the author of the tale!" (62). Asfaw Damte, too, finds fault with the narrator's silence about the mother, and even more about the fate of the father at the time of his children's marriage. As both commentators approach the narrator¹ with similar expectations, a response to one would clear the misreadings that led them to this stance. Damte states his position as follows:

. . . Wāhed's mother has been completely forgotten. What happened to her after her husband and two children left her? We have no answer to this. . . . What happened to Tobyā's father? The reader knows that he was somewhere around the palace towards the end of the story. But why doesn't the author clarify his fate? Of course, the reader can assume that if Wāhed and his sister had such luck, their father, too, would be reinstated in his former post, bring over his wife, and happily live together? (30)

Asfaw Damte does not give his reasons for his reservation about such logical assumptions by the reader. Nevertheless, it is to this kind of conclusion that the evidence in the text leads the reader. After Tobyā and her father meet the young king, they do not "completely" forget the mother. When the father declines the king's offer to appoint Tobyā as the royal chamberlain, for instance, his reason is that she cannot live happily in the palace, separated from her mother and brother. Again when Tobyā turns down the king's marriage proposal, she uses this opportunity to remind him of his promise to allow them to return to their home. These statements indicate that the mother is not forgotten either by the narrator or by her husband and daughter. Besides, if Wāhed is prepared to make so much sacrifice just to express his gratitude to a kind stranger and if Tobyā can put up with so many difficulties for the sake

of her brother, the reader has no reason to assume that these twins would abandon their mother or father when they are at the height of power and glory. There is no ambiguity about the happy turn of events at the end of the story, for even the king declares in his eulogistic poem that Tobyā is the pride of not only her parents but also her husband and that her sojourn is not in vain as she has "ultimately gained a crown" (89). Prior to the royal marriages, Tobyā's father is appointed as one of the king's courtiers and given a lot of gold. On the eve of the weddings, Wāhed, too, is given the highest title next to the king and appointed as the ruler of the Christian land. Given such clues, the conclusion that the father and the mother are ultimately reunited is logically in line with the theme of family love and hence obvious enough without the narrator spelling it out.

As Albert Gérard rightly points out, the development of the plot in this novel is facilitated by the use of coincidences (283). "Coincidence is the stuff fiction is made of; the necessary trick of the writer is to make the coincidence seem natural," says Walter MacDonald (373). How then does Afawarq Gabrayasus make the coincidence "seem natural?" To answer this it is necessary to examine how coincidental and non-coincidental events are blended. Such a blending can be most clearly observed in the nature of the link among the incidents that occur between the moments of Wāhed's embarking on his mission and his reunion with his people.

Even before Wāhed starts his search for the merchant, the success of his mission is undermined by a number of factors. One of these is his ignorance of the name and address of his benefactor. While this ignorance appears later to be coincidental in respect to the need to find the merchant, it is convincingly justified when we are told that Wāhed was too excited by the unexpected gift of gold to even express his gratitude at that moment. Besides, Wāhed could have no reason for asking the name and address of the merchant, as he does not anticipate his father's release through the generosity of this stranger. But once he realizes who is responsible for his father's liberty, he vows to find this benefactor by searching for him everywhere. However, the narrator repeatedly reminds us that Wāhed is only a teenager, who has hardly been away from home before. By thus implying that Wāhed's knowledge of the surrounding land is inadequate, the narrator prepares us for

the difficulties that the young traveller will encounter. We also know that, being a caravan merchant, Wāhed's benefactor is constantly on the move. Furthermore, this man's ability to send the enslaved Dajāzmāch a horse, money, and food, apart from paying the ransom, suggests the existence of some contact between the caravan merchants and the neighboring Muslims,² who also trade in slaves. Now, if Wāhed's only way of finding his benefactor is by following the trail of the caravans and checking at their trading centers, his inadvertent straying into the hostile Muslims' land becomes an easily anticipated outcome. In this context, Wāhed's encounters with the mule attendants, the peasants, and their enslaved son are supplementary coincidences with a thematic significance. The mule attendants assume he is a thief and beat him mercilessly, whereas the peasant woman saves his life by nursing him tenderly. For Wāhed, these two incidents serve as the premises for a moral lesson about the contrasts in human nature. His meeting with the enslaved son of the kind peasants is a preparatory condition for another demonstration of Wāhed's virtuosity as, later on, he will repay his hosts' kindness by appointing his slave mate as his deputy. These minor coincidences are fillers, since their omission from the story wouldn't have altered the course of development of the plot. But their inclusion has also served to reinforce the reader's anticipation of Wāhed's enslavement. The kind peasants' story about their son's enslavement and their warning against trusting strangers, for instance, are signals which foreshadow Wāhed's fate. The implication of this warning becomes more evident when the narrator heightens the disparity between the credulous Wāhed's wonderment at the eccentric hospitality of his new hosts and their ulterior motive for giving him such attention. The foreshadowing is validated when his Muslim hosts eventually sell him into slavery.

When Tobyā and her father embark on the search for Wāhed, the chances of their success are undermined from the start. They do not know the whereabouts of the person they are looking for, although they know his identity. While Tobyā and her father are pursuing this apparently futile mission, the plot is further complicated by a new development, namely the Muslim's second invasion. Although the opportune timing of the invasion is coincidental, the event itself is not unexpected. In the preliminary exposition the narrator has prepared us for

it by explaining the continuous nature of the conflict. In the opening of the story he says, "every time, every year, . . . [the Christians and the infidels] fought against each other, slaughtered each other, annihilated each other" (*Tobyā* 1). We can also infer from the same exposition of hostility that it was the benefits from war booty and the sale of captives that spurred them on to such aggression. As the transitional phrase "in the same manner" (2) suggests, the first invasion, too, is motivated by these same factors. Fikre Tolossa wonders why

the pagan king must invade the country for the second time, he has already subdued the country, and had he wanted to convert the Christians to his religion . . . instead of returning to this territory, he could have done so that moment he subdued the whole country. But when one probes into the matter, one realises that the second unjustified invasion is . . . [intended by the author] to complicate and develop the plot. (61)

But whether or not to complicate the plot is the prerogative of the writer. The reader's objection should be directed not to this license but to arbitrary developments that contradict what he or she has been led to expect yet without fulfilling an ultimate purpose. And there is no such inexplicable inconsistency with regard to the occurrence of the second invasion. To begin with, the narrator has already informed us about the frequency of past clashes, and by that standard a time lapse of a year and a half is a long enough period for a second clash to occur. There has already been a precedent in the past when both sides have been alternately triumphant over the other and yet not occupied its territory. So there is nothing unusual about the fact that the first invasion does not result in an occupation of the Christian land. Besides, the narrator himself makes clear the limited objective of the first invasion when he says, "after their victory the infidels entered the country as they had boasted, laid it waste, took the cattle and their captives, and returned to their country"(2).^{*} There is no mention of any plan to convert the Christians to their religion nor any suggestion of the Muslim king's direct participation in the invasion.

The motivation for the second invasion, however, is not

^{*} All translations in this chapter are mine. [T. A.]

purely economic. Nor does the aggression come in the form of a booty-grabbing raid. As the wealthy peasant explains to his guests, the death of the Christian king has left the country not only leaderless but also defenseless. There is now no acknowledged leader who could mobilize the people into an organized fighting force. Says the wealthy host, "when he heard this news the king of the infidels mobilized his men, loaded his *mesebāhā* [prayer beads] on his camels, and started marching towards our country to occupy our land, to convert the Christians to his religion, and to destroy those who refuse conversion"(36). It is these factors that become the pretext for the second invasion and its coinciding with the search for Wāhed.

This convergence of the two events, however, does not by itself bring about the fateful encounter between Tobyā and the Muslim king (on which the success of their search ultimately depends). There are still other incidents and conditions, both accidentally and casually motivated ones, which pave the way for this encounter by narrowing down the chances of Tobyā and the king bypassing each other.

The first step in this direction is taken by isolating Tobyā and her father from the other Christians so that they would not fall into the hands of the ordinary Muslim fighters like their host villagers. This occurs when Tobyā and her father ride in a different direction instead of joining the people hosting them and fleeing with them to the relative safety of the nearby gullies and bushes. Although no explanation is explicitly offered regarding why the two do not join the villagers, the availability of the horse seems to have induced them to flee alone. They seem to have assumed that they could escape by covering much distance ahead of the approaching invaders. Their constantly looking back to check how far they have outdistanced the soldiers is an indication of their intention to escape in this way. But they soon realize not only the futility of such a ride but also the scarcity of a hiding place in the exposed flat terrain. When the lone and desolate hill turns out to be the only sanctuary available, it is obvious that an element of chance is applied to save them from the Muslim fighters close behind them. Tobyā thus argues, "not all the soldiers are likely to march on foot, and if they use animals, they will naturally ride in the plain where they can get villages to plunder. The invaders will not climb a hill where there are no people, no

livestock, no crops, no silver or gold to plunder, but only the waste matter of vultures”(41). Accordingly, the two abandon their horse, climb up to the top of the hill, and from that vantage point watch the Muslims ravage the villages in the surrounding neighborhood. In the morning, the huge Muslim army passes by on both sides of the hill, with no one breaking rank to climb it. Late in the afternoon, however, the size of the marching soldiers thins out, leading Tobyā and her father to assume that all the soldiers would soon finish passing by, thus enabling them to return to their home on the next day.

But fickle chance now works to bring them face to face with the young Muslim king. The sun begins to set at about the time that the king and his escorts, who form the rear of the army, approach the lone hill. Sunset forces them to make camp at the foot of the very same hill, thereby making the presence of this landmark a catalyst in the development of the plot. Since it has been a long-standing custom for the monarchs to survey the surrounding land before settling down in their temporary camps, what better site for this purpose than the top of the hill! So, unaware of what awaits him, the young king climbs the hill and, naturally, spots the two people who have taken refuge there. Had it not been for the magnanimity of the king, his trophy-hungry courtiers should have hacked them to death, however. His intervention is justified by a plausible motivation, on the grounds that it is no proof of valor to kill an unarmed and passive enemy. He argues that those who are in no position to counter attack should only be taken captive. He then declares that Tobyā and her father are his captives and thus keeps them in his company. When he feels in full control of the Christian country, he makes a decree calling for the establishment of peace and order. He also threatens to punish severely any rivals from the Christian aristocracy that may try to undermine his rule: “If, after this decree, you refuse to settle down to normal life and instead seek to challenge my rule by leading the people into rebellion, you shall forever forfeit your land and privileges and pay dearly for your misdeeds” (58-59).

Following the decree, the march stops and the king settles down at one place. This in turn gives him enough opportunity to know more about his two captives. He assumes that Tobyā is a male (because she is disguised as one) and, like everyone else in the royal court, begins to appreciate her vir-

tuosity. Within a short period of time, he decides to appoint her as his chamberlain. Initially, however, the father declines the position on her behalf, on the ground that they have to continue with their search for her brother. Upon hearing about Wāhed's disappearance, the king makes a nationwide declaration offering to pay ten-fold to any one who brings him the slave he is looking for. Some months later this news reaches Wāhed's master, who, attracted by the reward, soon brings Wāhed to the king.

Although the plot is built on an intermingling of causality and chance, the distinction between the two becomes nominal when considered on a higher thematic plane. When one takes into account the Christian characters' fatalistic interpretation of their mixed fortunes, one can sense in it a vision of life in which everything is predetermined by God. He is the ultimate motive force behind every event, irrespective of whether it appears to be causally motivated or merely the work of chance. For them, every occurrence is equally and without distinction a manifestation of His mysterious will.

We know, for instance, that the Dajāzmāch is able to be reunited with his family only because the merchant paid the ransom for him. While the family, too, recognize the merchant's generous role, they, nevertheless, regard him as the instrument for the fulfillment of God's will. Such a view is implicit in Tobyā's speech when she consoles her father during the second invasion:

Dear father; In the past, God gave us joy by miraculously delivering you from slavery. God does not start what He will not complete. Now, too, He will cause His miracles to protect us against any harm . . . So do not lose hope. Let us trust our worries to Him. (39)

Earlier the wealthy peasant explains to Tobyā and her father the economic, political, and religious motivations of the second invasion. But Tobyā still thinks that the invasion is the design of God and, in spite of the imminent threat to their lives, she has no doubt that God will intervene on their behalf. After all, no power of humans or the elements is too great for God to overcome. When the king spots Tobyā and her father in their hiding place and asks them why they are there, the father

replies, "we thought that God would save us from the ravages of this army and hid here"(47). When this trust in God is mocked by the king's jester, the father counters it by enumerating opposite and, on the whole, extreme traits of the elements which are beyond the control of man:

Neither the proximity of the mountain nor the distance of the plain, neither the height of the sky nor the depth of the ocean, neither the mildness of the wind nor the blaze of the sun, neither the ferocity of the volcano nor the coldness of the snow, neither the darkness of the night nor the brilliance of the daylight can prevent this God, Whom you are deriding, from sending his mercy or wrath. (48)

Underlying such testimonials is a deeply ingrained religious ideology, which also shapes the ideals within that society's value-schemes. The merchant, for instance, pays all that amount of gold for the release of the Dajāzmāch not just out of pity but because he believes that God would reward his deed in the Hereafter. Tobyā, too, initially rejects the privileges of being a great queen and even risks her well-being because she regards marrying a non-Christian as being tantamount to abandoning God and the eternal joys of the Otherworld. To Tobyā and her father (as well as to the narrator who identifies with them) chance and necessity have a single and inalienable ultimate cause, God's will. Since the informing principle behind such a structural organization of the story appears to be the religious ideology, the verisimilitude of the frequent coincidences and other extraordinary events cannot be appreciated apart from this context.

II

Fikre Tolossa, in the introduction to his dissertation, advances the rather circular argument that "the realistic representation of social life is universal and could be practiced by any realistic writer in any part of the real world" (19). With this as his premise, he argues that Afawarq Gabrayasus' novel is not a realistic work because, "contrary to a realistic piece of work, there are too few truthful details in it"(62). To him such an event as the conversion of the Muslim king and his followers to Christianity is unconvincing because it cannot happen in reality(64).

The distinguished critic Tzvetan Todorov rejects as “most naive” that notion of verisimilitude which expects a portrayal to be “consistent with reality” or which denies the category to events which seem “unable to occur in reality” (82). In place of such a notion, he presents three major versions of verisimilitude two of which are relevant to the present context. In one version, verisimilitude is taken as “a relation not with reality (as is truth) but with what most people believe to be reality, in other words, with public opinion. Hence discourse, not with its referent”(82). In the second version, verisimilitude is determined by the work’s relation to the laws of its *genre*; “there are as many verisimilitudes as there are *genres*”(83).

Afawarq Gabrayasus’ novel was written for an audience whose outlook, unlike that of its more skeptical counterpart in 20th century Europe, was not conditioned by the cause-and-effect premises of a scientific culture. The following description by an anthropologist can show the kind of outlook the society addressed by the novel must have had:

Prayers to God are spoken on numerous occasions. God’s blessing is sought when an animal is slaughtered, when a group of people sits to eat, when a new house is begun, and when it is completed. Each day begins with a prayer like this: ‘May He cause me to spend the day in peace. May He keep trouble from me. May He pardon my sins.’ When the peasant begins planting, he also prays: ‘God bless the seed; feed me, keeping birds away from it; bless it for the mouth of man.’

It is probably the attribute of God’s omnipotence, however, that appears most vivid to the Amhara mind. Everything that happens reflects His active will. The thunder expresses His anger, a flood the visitation of His Wrath upon the sinful. He is ever active, bringing births and deaths, prosperity and hunger, leading one traveler to safety and another to disaster. He controls the homeliest of details of everyday life. One boy, troubled that he was not selling his goods in the market, confessed that God must be angry with him about something. Another, asked what he wanted to do the following year, replied: ‘If God wants me to, I may go to school; but it is difficult to know what God will want.’ (Levine 67-68)

Apart from its conformity with such “public opinion” as well as

the verisimilitude of the *gadel* to a limited extent, the novel has its own textural mechanism for monitoring the reader's responses. This is the series of overt and covert signals that the authorial narrator relays to the narratee. Like the narrator himself the narratee is a textual construct, an impersonalized being that does not as such belong to the fictional world. It is, in a way, the reader's representation in the text and hence significantly influences the reader's responses to the story. In the words of Gérard Prince:

The most obvious role of the narratee, a role that he always plays in a certain sense, is that of relay between the narrator and the reader(s), or rather between author and the reader(s). Should certain values have to be defended or certain ambiguities clarified, this can easily be done by means of asides addressed to the narratee. Should the importance of a series of events be emphasized? Should one reassure or make uneasy, justify certain actions or underscore their arbitrariness? All this can be done by addressing signals to the narratee. (20-21)

In the case of *Tobyā*, we can gather from the narrator's various comments how the narratee's anticipation's are monitored and how he or she is signalled to suspend his disbelief. At the beginning of the story, for instance, the narrator offers a brief and generalized exposition about past wars in which the triumphant Muslims ravaged the land of their Christian neighbors and enslaved the captives. By thus providing the precedent for the outcome of the second invasion, the exposition "naturalizes" the defeat of the Christians, the plunder of their homeland, and the enslavement of the Dajāzmāch. Since he or she has already been alerted to the possibility of such an outcome, the narratee would not regard the victory of the Muslims as unusual.

The two maxims with which the story begins also serve as naturalizing devices. The first maxim goes: "He who does good lends; he who does evil is himself hurt." The second one goes: "When a generous person gives, he is in fact lending and not giving as such" (*Tobyā* 1). According to Jonathan Culler, when a maxim is explicitly cited,

the text itself performs the operations of naturalization but

simultaneously insists that the laws or explanations which it offers are the laws of the world. A sentence which is initially invraisemblable, such as "the Marquise called for her carriage and then went to bed" (invraisemblable because it deviates from an accepted logic of human actions) can be naturalized by additions which would bring it within the pale of accepted cultural models: "for she was extremely capricious" (where labelling makes deviation intelligible) or "for, like all women who have never encountered opposition to their desires, she was extremely capricious" (which produces the relevant maxim . . .). (144)

Likewise, since *Tobyā* does not as such operate on an ironic plane, the two maxims serve as a cultural frame of reference which explicates some of the actions and fortunes of the characters. When the slave owner announces his condition for releasing the Dajāzmāch, the narrator intrudes to explain why the latter's family could not afford to pay the ransom. We are told that, as the Dajāzmāch was in the habit of helping the needy and rewarding the valorous, his generosity did not allow him to save much money in his heyday. This comment also signals the narratee to anticipate the Dajāzmāch's release by some means, in reciprocation of his own benevolent deeds in the past. When he is eventually released and reunited with his family, the maxim's validity is confirmed, thereby leading the narratee to expect a better fortune for the now impoverished merchant, the enslaved Wāhed, and the bereaved parents who nurse his wounds. The anticipatory significance of the maxims again becomes apparent when the narrator alludes to them when explaining that the transformation of the poor merchant's evil or good will be repaid accordingly, not only in the other world but also sometimes in this world (*Tobyā* 79).

Other frames of reference are also used to naturalize actions which seem to conflict with the norms that are implied by their antecedents. During the Muslim king's first encounter with *Tobyā* and her father, for instance, the king unexpectedly defends the equality of all religions. To counter in advance the narratee's skepticism towards this act, the narrator comments on the speech: "The king then interrupted their laughter and, as if he were inspired by the Holy Spirit, spoke thus . . . All those who were escorting him were surprised by this unexpected speech" (49). The narrator's reference to the "Holy

Spirit," the astonishment of the escorts, and the unexpected nature of the king's speech are signs of admission by the narrator that the act is unusual. But this recognition by the narrator is also a means of asserting to the narratee: "believe it or not, this is the truth! this is what actually happened!"

Daniachew Worku maintains that the narrator's commentaries are not appropriately employed. Discussing such intrusions in this and another novel he says:

Direct comments by the author which once in a while crop up in some of the pages, as some of the following examples show, could again have helped to control and weave together the myriad strands of the lives of the people involved. But as they are, they haven't contributed much. On every page, they are simply lines of sentimental rubbish, and the effect of them is irritating. (*Ethiopian Herald* 6 Sept. 1970)

One of the examples which he cites is the commentary on the family's effort to raise the ransom money:

It is true that trying to raise an *elf waqet*³ of gold by hiring one's self out as a servant and by weaving cotton on contract is unbelievable. But what else could they do? They had no other alternative apart from these (Worku 5).

But, since Worku's criticism is levelled at all the commentaries, it seems to suffer from overgeneralization. As we have already seen, the maxims, which amount to commentaries, serve to naturalize the merchant's generosity and his reward later, and the appointment of the enslaved son of the kindly peasants. Likewise, the retribution of the noble deeds of the Dajāzmāch and Tobyā could also be explained in terms of these maxims. In light of this, quoting the maxims has contributed to the unity of the motivations of these characters, thereby weaving together the various strands of their lives.

The commentary on the family's attempt to raise the ransom money, too, has a function. Why does the narrator concede the futility of this attempt in advance? It is because he anticipates the narratee's skepticism. What is important here is not the achievement of the effort, but rather what is signified by the effort. The narrator wants to impress upon his audience not only the utter impoverishment of the family but also

the depth of their love for their enslaved man. So he poses a rhetorical question loaded with these implications and then gives a definitive answer affirming the genuineness of the family's situation.

Nevertheless, there are still some inconsistencies that the narrator has not explained by such overt signals. When Wāhed's father is sold into slavery, for instance, the narrator does not mention any problem of communication between him and his master. But when Wāhed in turn falls into the hands of his enslavers, the narrator deals in detail with the misunderstanding arising from the language barrier between the Muslims and their young victim. Yet, again, during the first encounter between the king and Tobyā's father, no such problem is mentioned. In fact the narrator later tells us even about the exchange of letters between Tobyā and the Muslim king. These inconsistencies could have been rendered intelligible by providing hints about the use of interpreters or the possibility of the characters speaking more than one language, but no such clues are given.

From the foregoing discussion, the reader can gather that the relation of this novel's fictional world to the external world is not an accurate recreation of a particular society in a definite historical period. It does not even have a specific setting of time and place to do this. It is true that one could identify elements of the Amhara culture in the food items, costumes, and honorary and official titles of some of the characters. From the narrator's few references to Lālibalā, Amhara, and Ethiopia, however, it is impossible to pinpoint the exact geographic setting of the story. Furthermore, contrary to what some critics (Albert Gérard, Thomas Kane, etc.) claim, the time setting of the story is not the beginning of Christianity. It seems that the narrator's initial reference to the time when "the Torah was rejected and the Gospel began to be preached" (1) is made in an attempt to trace the history of the persecution of the Christians. Even the Muslim king testifies that the constant conflicts between his subjects and the Christians (both neighboring peoples probably living in Ethiopia) continued for many generations. Other references to the "long English field glass," "writing paper," and "cannon" suggest a more recent time setting, perhaps no earlier than the Portuguese military expedition to Ethiopia in the 16th century.

Whatever particular time and place setting Afawarq Gabrayasus might have had in mind when he wrote his novel, it is obvious that the recreation of a definite historical society was secondary to his aim. The bigger-than-life images of the central characters and the special significance attached to the Christian values suggest that the portrayal is illustrative in nature. Scholes and Kellogg explain the difference between illustrative and representational portrayals as follows:

Illustration differs from representation in narrative art in that it does not seek to reproduce actuality but to present selected aspects of the actual, essences referable for their meaning not to historical, psychological or sociological truth but to ethical and metaphysical truth. Illustrative characters are concepts in anthropoid shape or fragments of the human psyche masquerading as whole human beings. Thus we are not called upon to understand their motivation as if they were whole human beings but to understand the principles they illustrate through their actions in a narrative framework. (88)

In the case of *Tobyā*, the object of the portrayal is an abstracted Ethiopia whose very survival is threatened by religious conflicts and which ultimately attains salvation and glory through the consolidation of Christian hegemony. The illustration and glorification of Christian ideals being a primary end, descriptive details are subordinated to the realization of this end.

III

Commenting on the quality of the description in this novel, Fikre Tolossa says:

The physical and psychological conditions of the characters are not portrayed in detail. True Tobyā is portrayed exaggeratedly beautiful [sic], and Wāhed's fear in the forest at night is reflected superbly. The king's jester, whom the author obviously hates, is fantastically portrayed as an ugly creature. But we have no idea of the real pictures of the general, his wife, the merchant and all those figures which Wāhed and the general encounter. The look of the houses in the story, the objects in them, the manners, customs and

norms of the people and the physical appearance of the invading army have not been painted as much as they would have been in a realistic work of literature. (62-63)

Tolossa seems to assume that the more detailed a description is, the more "realistic" the portrayal becomes. According to him, had the narrator described the Dajāzmāch, his wife, the generous merchant, and the like in as much detail as he does Wāhed's fear or the jester's ugliness (which Tolossa here cites as "good examples" of the "realistic elements" in the novel, 65-67), then the depiction of the characters would have been "realistic." But even taking his criterion of "truthful details" as the yardstick for determining the "realism" of a given depiction, it is obvious that there is little realism in the hyperbolic description of Wāhed's fear or the jester's ugliness. Nor would the quantity of descriptive details by itself determine the realism of a given depiction. Referential or ornamental description that neither explicates the developments in the plot nor contributes to the advancement of a theme has little place in this portrayal. The first invasion in which the Dajāzmāch is taken captive, for instance, is presented in a generalized summary. Since the primary function of this preliminary exposition is to lay bare the background to the onset of the central action, the narrator does not dwell on it in much detail, for the sake of vivifying the events of the war.

The second invasion, in contrast, is treated in greater detail, as it entails the climactic points of the story. The first physical sign of this invasion is the big cloud of smoke that heralds to Tobyā and her father the approach of the invading enemy. From the narrator's report, we gather that the Muslims are armed with spears and swords, that they try to destroy the Christian homeland by selectively massacring the able-bodied men, by taking the women as captives, by burning down their crops, homes, churches, and plants, by looting their property and driving away their cattle. From what Tobyā and her father witness, we come to know about how the overwhelmed Christians flee in disarray in their attempt to save their lives. More details that are lacking in the report of the first invasion now begin to emerge through vivid scenes like the approach of the royal retinue and the setting up of the tent-camps. These detailed descriptions amplify the grand scale of the destruction

wrought on the Christians and precarious state of their very survival as an independent community. They also show the overwhelming might of the invading Muslims and the seemingly irreversible nature of their dominance over the Christians. By drawing such contrasting images of the two belligerent forces, the descriptions have the cumulative effect of heightening to epic proportions Tobyā's crucial role in reversing the power balance of the two communities. In contrast to the Christians' seemingly immutable impotence, note, for instance, how an image of unearthly invincibility is built into this description of the invading army's camp:

When this tent [of the king] was seen, that vast plain lying flat like a sea was instantly covered with a multitude of tents. As it became packed with people, horses, mules and the stolen cattle, it seemed as if there wouldn't be enough space on the ground even for a lemon tossed into the air to fall on. The scene looked like a great gathering of all creatures summoned by a trumpet from the four corners of the world on the day of the Last Judgement. No one would have thought that this was the army of a single nation, under the command of one king. Their number was such that, let alone be defeated by human power, they seemed as if even a calamity delivered by Christ himself could not wipe them out, and if it did succeed, as if there wouldn't be enough space to bury them all. (45)

Since the contrast in the position of the two sides is deliberately sustained by subsequent descriptions of such a hyperbolic nature, the two protagonists' repeated invocation of divine intervention on the Christians' behalf, especially Tobyā's prayer, seems to suggest that a reversal of the new situation is impossible short of a miracle. And God seems to respond favorably to this appeal when He paves the way for the salvation of the Christians through the agency of Tobyā. The first sign is demonstrated on the occasion of the royal review of the warriors' parade. Thus after describing the majestic ceremony in which the brave warriors display their trophies and the blood-smeared garments of their Christian victims, the narrator says:

Very pleased with the bravado of his warriors, the king welcomed their display with beaming smiles. But when Tobyā saw all this jubilation she was deeply aggrieved by the loss of

life, the destruction of her country, the defeat of the Christians, and the rise of the infidels. She turned her face towards the side of her father and wept. The king noticed her from a distance and understood her sorrow. Realizing that one's suffering was another's joy he immediately interrupted the display of trophies without any explanation and went to his tent. (55)

That evening, while taking a walk in his camp, he passes by the tent of his two captives and again observes Tobyā lamenting over the fate of her fellow Christians. He spends the next day pondering over what course of action to take. He remembers the causes of Tobyā's grief and makes a decree to stop the further destruction of the Christians and their country. "After this decree the country was no more plundered and the people no longer killed," says the narrator (59). Following this decree there are also no further descriptions that contrast the positions of the Muslims and the Christians, either. The focus turns to Tobyā's increasing influence on the king.

It is Tobyā who is responsible for the conversion of the king and his followers to Christianity. It is she who is instrumental in the liberation of her fellow Christians and the redressing of the balance in political power, for, after his conversion, the king declared that the Christians shall rule and never be subjugated. "As a result of this decree, all the Christians sold into slavery were freed" (86). Tobyā herself is well aware of her vital role in effecting these changes. After a prolonged psychological crisis, when the king finally agrees to be converted to Christianity, the narrator says: "instead of the prospect of becoming a queen, it was her being the cause for the conversion of that great king of the infidels which pleased Tobyā. For this she thanked God" (83). In her ability to win over the king and improve the conditions of her fellow Christians, Tobyā attains the status of a Christian crusader. This can be inferred from the military orientation of the language of the panegyrics which she and the king improvise on the occasion of their wedding. Thus he says:

She has joined the government of two nations
Undaunted as she is by fears of combat
There she is in the thick of the battle
And before any hero, she has taken the king captive. (89)

Tobyā replies to this by first building a grand image of the might of the king (in a manner parallel to that of the narrator's descriptions) and then concluding with an anticlimax that reduces this power to impotence in the face of Christianity:

He who made thousands upon thousands of Amharas flee
 He who smashed the Rāses and Dajāzmāches
 He who dethroned the one with the great crown
 He who was never scared of even the cannon,
 Let alone the spear and sword,
 He whose news brought shivers even at a distance
 He whose voice brought panic across the precipice
 He who broke the ox of the monastery
 He whom the most solid chain could not restrain
 The lion is tamed and shackled with a
mātab [neck-cord]

All those infantry men
 All those heroes
 All those warriors
 All those parading combatants
 He disarmed through a priest. (90)

While the king emphasizes Tobyā's charm and prowess, Tobyā underscores the king's great might in the face of the power of the Christian faith. The poems sum up Tobyā's epic role as well as glorifying the ideals she symbolizes.

As has been stated earlier, purely ornamental descriptions of landscapes, interiors, and casual scenes are rare in this novel. The description of the big compound of Wāhed's would-be master, for instance, is plot-oriented. Its immediate function is to show why the Christian slaves could not escape from their captivity. This is how it is described:

The estate was encircled by a wide moat like a fortress. Within it there was a stone fence on all sides. The top of the fence was covered with acacia thorns so that no one would jump over it. In the middle of this there were two big *saqalā* houses and two *beta negus* halls. The compound had only two gates, one of which was very narrow and the other wide enough to let one enter mounted on a horse. At this main gate

was standing a man as dark as the devil. His chest looked wide enough to be measured in cubits. His height loomed like a pillar. His eyes looked as if they were rubbed with *ensosellā* [i.e., were blood-shot]. His nose looked as if an avalanche of rocks had rolled over it. His arms, which looked like the feet of an elephant, were adorned with tin and copper armlets. With his four-edged sword dangling down his pumpkin-like naked belly and his club firmly held in his right hand, he planted himself at the main gate to keep away anyone who had no permission to enter. (28)

The above scene is presented from Wāhed's perceptual point of view,⁴ as he sees it from outside. At first he thinks that the compound belongs to the chief of the hamlet. But the moment he enters the compound he realized that "all that estate, all that fortress, all that reinforcement with thorns was the property of a big slave trader, and that it was all designed to prevent the captured slaves from jumping over the fence and escaping during the day or night" (29).

In the description of the physical appearance of the characters, the features which the narrator cites are often those that are peculiar. In the description of the guard above, for instance, there is no mention of his hair, teeth, or the like. Rather, it is the darkness of his skin, the wideness of his chest, the blood-shot color of his eyes, the flatness of his nose, the largeness of his arms, the bulkiness of his belly, and his towering height which catch the attention of the perceiver. The guard is painted as ghastly-looking so as to reinforce the impression of an awesome environment with little chance of escape. In the case of the jester and the dwarf it is those features that heighten their ugliness that are cited. In each case, hyperbole is the standard form of description and the amplified images are effected by a series of similes.

The description of Tobyā's looks, while still on a hyperbolic scale, differs from the above three in the quantity and quality of the details. Her eyes, eyelashes, nose, lips, hair, teeth, neck, fingers, waist, and legs are described in descending order from top to bottom and in the most favorable terms, using for comparison such clichés as the morning star, the blooming rose, the glistening snow, and the queen bee. Her superb beauty is likened to that of the angels: "It was in vain that Tobyā wore flesh, for her charm and beauty made her look

like a close kin of the cherubim" (60). The narrator uses this goddess-like image to justify her speedy popularity in the royal court and her increasing influence over the king. The technique the narrator uses here is first to build a larger-than-life image of the king's military might and then to counter it with an even more larger-than-life image of Tobyā's charm and beauty. Thus, after vividly describing her looks, the narrator concludes: "as in the saying that even angels love the beautiful, so, when this young king saw all this gift of God, his spirit loved her very much and he wanted to raise her as his chamberlain. His love made him forget their differences in religion. Yet, he never suspected her femininity" (60-61).

Although the complete resemblance between Tobyā and her twin brother has been repeatedly pointed out (as when they are first introduced to the reader and later when the father tells the king the parents' difficulty in distinguishing between the twins), it is she who is singled out for such a detailed description. The purpose of the emphasis on this physical resemblance is to facilitate the marriage match, since the king's cousin confuses Wāhed with Tobyā and marries him.

The king himself is described in sparse details, though in terms that put him in clear contrast with the ugly jester and the dwarf. The features selected seem designed to generate an image of a benign ruler: his speech is "polished and sweet," his countenance is "graceful," his complexion is "vintage wine," his bearing is majestic and awe-inspiring" (52-53).

Since the narrator is least motivated by ornamental ends or the need to satisfy his audience's curiosity about the physical features of all the main characters, he does not describe the looks of the Dajāzmāch, the generous merchant, Wāhed's master, and the king's cousin. It seems that functionality also determines the description of landscapes and compounds. Thus, while the compound of Wāhed's master is described, his own home is not.

IV

The fictional world of Afawarq Gabrayasus' novel is populated mainly by two categories of characters: the virtuous (who are essentially the Christians) and the wicked (who are essentially the non-Christians). In each case, however, there are exceptions. Contrasting the kindness of the peasants who saved his

life with the cruelty of the mule attendants who mercilessly beat him, Wāhed speculates "how many good people and how many evil people there are in this world." On the side of the Muslims, too, the king's magnanimity and religious tolerance is presented as an exception, for it surprises even his close followers. In spite of these exceptions, the moral division between the followers of the two religions is clearly marked. The generosity of the Christian merchant, for instance, stands in sharp contrast with the greed of the two slave owners. The genuine hospitality of the peasant families is also similarly contrasted with the hypocrisy of Wāhed's hosts who sell him into slavery.

One distinct feature of the characterization of the protagonists is that their thoughts and acts are geared to illuminating their virtues in particular. Before his enslavement, the Dajāzmāch used his wealth for helping the needy and for rewarding the brave. On the day he is reunited with his family, before he even gets enough rest, he asks his son to "immediately" take him to the address of the generous merchant. Wāhed, too, does not lose time in setting out his mission of finding his man, for he starts his journey the very next day that his father returns home. Although Wāhed does not know the name and address of this man and is too young for the arduous task, he vows not to give up his search until the end of his life. During the search, he suffers from hunger and thirst, cold and heat. He encounters physical torture and enslavement. But even when he is finally rescued by the king, neither his past suffering nor the prospect of a comfortable life with the king slackens his resolve to find his benefactor and express his gratitude. His personality is thus built on one trait: an unshakable determination to return good with good, for that is what he does for the merchant and the peasants that nursed him. In the eyes of the narrator, Wāhed's pursuit of such noble causes earns him the status of the Righteous, as is implicit in the analogy that Wāhed's "suffering and pain was no less than that of the martyrs which one hears about when their *gadel* is read"(22). And yet, even though Wāhed is a dedicated Christian, the strength of his piety does not seem to match that of his sister. When the king offers him his cousin in marriage, he does not reject it as such. His preference to wait and see what decision his sister will make seems to suggest the possibility of his agreeing to marry a non-Christian if Tobyā

were to accept the king's marriage proposal.

Tobyā's piety is the main trait, if not, the only one that distinguishes her from her brother. Even when she and her father are under the shadow of death, it is she who consoles him by telling him that God will deliver them from the menace of the invaders. When the king asks the Dajāzmāch to give him Tobyā in marriage, the father is anxious not to give his consent without first consulting her, for he knows that "Tobyā is too strict on matters of religion"(81). And as he suspected, she rejects the proposal outright on grounds of religion. When the king is thus forced to be converted to her religion, she considers the event not only as her own victory, but also as the triumph of Christianity (as is implicit in her poem).

Tobyā is not only pious but also an accomplished actress. Her disguise as a young man (not only in her dressing but also in her voice, carriage, manners) takes in the courtiers, the king, his uncle, his cousin, and even her own brother, who could not recognize her at first. But, as far as her symbolic significance is concerned, this is an accidental attribute necessitated by the exigencies of plot. It is a feature taken for granted, as is Wāhed's pretense to be her when he marries the king's cousin. As far as the meaning of the novel goes, what matters is that her charm, beauty, and piety cause the conversion of their old enemies to Christianity. It is this factor that the narrator underlines when he sums up her role: "due to one woman all believed [in Christ]" (86).

Since the focus of the story dwells more on the movements, actions, and thoughts of the Christian characters, the antagonists tend to be shadowy. Even so, the greed of the slave merchants, the brutality of the soldiers, and the jealousy of the courtiers have the cumulative effect of making their king's virtuosity stand out in sharp relief. But the plot seems to suggest that however kind, wise, and mighty he may be, he still falls short of being the ideal monarch as a Muslim. It is worth noting that it is the Christian Tobyā who inspires love in the king and his cousin, not the other way round. The moral of this situation seems to be that love and happiness go with Christianity, for it is he and his cousin who abandon their religion, seeking love and happiness from the Christians. After the symbolic marriages, the narrator thus declares: "Joy reigned over their household for many generations; their gov-

ernment became strong and their faith ever firm" (88). It is not only their actions but also the names of the two protagonists which have an illustrative significance. The idealized Tobyā seems to symbolize Ethiopia. "Wāhed," according to the king, means "the infidels and the Amhara are united" (87). The characters are, however, flat and static. Their speeches, which are rather sparse and occasionally set off from the narrator's statements by ellipses, instead of quotation marks or indented margins, hardly bear the stamp of their idiosyncracies.

There is little distance between the characters and the authorial narrator. He shares the protagonists' outlook, values, and prejudices. What pleases them (such as the merchant's generosity) pleases him, too. What angers them (such as the jester's derision of their Christianity) angers him, too. He is a reliable guide to the values of the implied author. To ensure that the narratee is on the right track, he constantly intrudes into the story to explain, to generalize, to evaluate, and to emphasize or underscore the events and their significances.

Whenever he enters the minds of the characters, which is not very frequently, the inside view he affords us often comes in paraphrases and explanatory commentary. Wāhed's fear is the only extensively depicted psychological state in this novel. It is presented in a manner that shows the character's feelings via his action, speech, and physical state. Here are a few excerpts:

When it became very dark, he lost his way and his courage began to wane. As he looked ahead and to the back, to the left and to the right, he thought that all that he saw was hyena, a leopard, a lion. He said, any moment the hyena will sneak up from behind and bite my side, the leopard will leap out and strangle me, the lion will crush me. Woe is me! If I now escape from one the other is likely to get me! As he said this, fear gripped him. But what could he do? This was his fate. Besides, he was only a raw youth. While all this was happening, Wāhed did not stop slowly moving in the direction of the market place that he had seen. At one point he saw in the darkness something like a bush. He thought that it was the real lion with its four legs, and his soul seemed to leave his body. With his legs shaking, when he again stared hard that false lion created by fear seemed to move hesitantly, as if undecided about whether or not to spring at him. (16)

But Wāhed was all alone. Apart from his own shadow which mingled with the darkness, he had no other companion at the time. When that lifeless bush which was vainly taken for a lion wouldn't move, Wāhed changed his own course. But when he looked back at this fear-inspired bush-lion, he thought it was following him. His legs began to shake again and refused to carry him. Wāhed became so panicky that every dark object he saw appeared to him as some beast. Changing his direction he then walked up and down. And all of a sudden something like a small cave sprung up on his left side and brought shivers all over his body. The shock caused a cold sweat to run down his spine. When I escaped from the first lion I have ended up facing the second one. This would be the end of me, said Wāhed as his dread increased. (17)

In this way the dramatization of Wāhed's fear runs on for nearly four pages. Although the scene is potentially suspenseful, the narrator's constant assurances that it is merely a boy's fantasy reduce its full realization. While this depiction heightens the impression of Wāhed's sacrifices (as he would also soon be mercilessly beaten), its adverse effect is to magnify the disparity between Wāhed's adult-like seriousness of purpose and the limits of his maturity (age-wise).

In the rendition of some scenes in which the characters' points of view are accommodated, the perspective is unexpectedly altered, thereby undermining its credibility. This is the case in the description of the dramatic emergence into view of the royal escorts. As the group advances towards the hill on which Tobyā and her father have taken refuge, details which could not be accessible to these two watchers are offered. Tobyā has been telling her father that soon all the invaders will pass by, as their number has begun to slim down. The two could then pass the night on the hill and the next day travel to the area evacuated by the invaders.

The moment she finished saying this, however, something dark like the rain-clouds of July appeared from the far end of the plain. While father and daughter were wondering about what it was, it could be seen roaring and spiralling up as if it was driven by a whirlwind. It was actually the dust raised by the hooves of the horses of the royal escorts. As father and daughter watched this, they were again gripped

by fear and sorrow, and they began to lose hope. So they prayed to God and the angels for deliverance. But as the groups of escorts drew nearer, the sounds of drums and horns, intermingled with the noise of the wind, could be heard. The reflections from the men's golden head-dresses, footwear, and other garments and from the decorated harnesses of the horses and mules blended with the brightness of the sun and made the eyes blink. In the middle of the two groups of escorts, a few people could be seen huddled together. The king was riding a mule that ached not so much under his weight as under that of its golden harness. A silken canopy embroidered with gold was held out for him on both sides. As he rode, the king was chatting with a few of his courtiers. But as the sun was beginning to set that graceful march suddenly came to a standstill as if its advance were angrily checked. (43-44)

In the above description, such details as the party's initial appearance in the form of a cloud of dust and then a dense forest are consistent with the distance from which Tobyā and her father are watching the scene. So are the sounds of drums and horns. Although it is natural for these first impressions to become more accurate as the escorts get closer to the hill, it would still be difficult for the two observers to see much more than the glitter of the escort's garments. From that vantage point they could neither discern particular garments worn by the escorts nor identify the king in the crowd surrounding him. After all, the narrator himself has given us an idea of the height of the hill when he earlier said that, to someone looking up from the foot of the hill, even a huge elephant standing at the top of the hill will not appear bigger than the size of "a fly." By the same logic, Tobyā and her father can only see a large crowd of people, not identify specific details of individual items of apparel or particular persons whom they have never met before. Hence such details as the head-dress and the information about the king (including whether he is chatting or silent, and his mule's aching from the weight of her harness) could only be offered from the omniscient narrator's perspective. Likewise, in the subsequent description of the royal camp, such details as the small objects struck on the peak of the king's tent would be too minute for the observers to identify in detail. So, even though the narrator reports that Tobyā and her father

“knew” that the emblem of the *sobade’āt* (centaur) fastened on the flag was the idol worshipped by the “infidels,” it seems that he is projecting his own omniscience onto their perspective.

Most commentators have attributed this work’s merit entirely to its linguistic style. Thus, Albert Gérard, who seems to be echoing other people’s view on this score (since he doesn’t read Amharic), declares:

Quite justifiably, this rather naive and in some respects almost Victorian story, has been chiefly commended for its style.... But in Amharic aesthetic thought, it is just this wealth and complexity, this ability to summon up all the varied resources of the language, this virtuosity in manipulating sound values, hyperboles, double entendres and proverbs, which make the book worthy of admiration and account for its popular success. (283)

Molvaer goes one step further and asserts: “The book is valued for its style, and the author may have written it as a purely artistic exercise;” it is “art for art’s sake” (8). The vividness with which some of the scenes and characters are described is undeniably a notable stylistic quality. But it is simply an exaggeration to say the same about the rather dull language of the dialogues or the rest of the non-descriptive passages. As for its being “art for art’s sake,” one need only note the rather obvious didactic exemplification of Christian values and political benevolence. One must note the similarities between the narrator’s positive attitude to the Muslim king’s first decree (in which he seeks to establish a harmonious relationship between the soldiers and the peasants) and Afawarq Gabrayasus’ praise for Menilek’s alleged alleviation of the plight of the peasants to realize the element of political exemplification (*Dagmawi Menilek*, 1909). Still, the didacticism in this work is not as thinly-veiled and dry as it is in Heruy Wolde-Selassie’s and Girmachew Tekle-Hawariat’s novels, for instance. Dialogues and narratorial commentary, the standard vehicular devices in other didactic works, are not used here for openly preaching the author’s views. Unlike the linguistic style, the author’s methods of forging an organic unity between plot and theme have not received sufficient critical attention. Neither have his techniques of constructing a tight and symmetrically structured plot, an aspect in which the work excels over many later novels.

NOTES

1. In difference to Tolossa and Damte, who both refer to the story teller as "author," I shall refer to him throughout my study as "narrator." He is the "voice" or "speaker" in the text. He tells the story either omnisciently, from without (as "authorial narrator"), or as a participant (a "narrating character"). In line with contemporary practice, I shall reserve for the writer who is in flesh and blood, in this case Afawarq Gabrayesus, the term "real author" whenever the context demands such a distinction. I shall use "implied author" to refer to the real author's fictional second self which, like the omniscient narrator, is not a character but a textual construct. As Wayne Booth puts it, "the implied author" chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man: he is the sum of his own choices" (74-75). In hypothetical terms, this implied author is the creator of the narrator as well as the events and the characters. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see also Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*.
2. Many commentators (including Gérard, Thomas Kane, Damte) refer to the antagonist characters as "pagans," just as the authorial narrator often does. But there are many evidences in the text which suggest that these people are Muslims. The kind peasants tell Wāhed that their son was kidnapped and sold into slavery by "Muslim" merchants (26). Wāhed's master is also reported to be a "Muslim" merchant (79). While defending the equality of all religions during his first encounter with Tobyā and her father, the king repeatedly refers to the Creator as "Allah" (49-50). Just as the Christian characters refer to their opponents as "aramane," the other side, too, refer to them as "kafir" (both words mean "non-believer" or "infidel," although "aramane" also carries the connotation of being brutal). In Ge'ez religious texts such as the *Metsihafe Senkesar*, references to the Muslims as "aramane" are not uncommon. Gabrayesus, too, shows a similar religious prejudice not only in this novel but also in *Dagmawi Menilek*, where he alternately refers to the Dervishes both as "Muslims" and "aramane" (56-57).
3. According to Dasta Takla Wald's *Addis Ya-Amareñña Mazgaba Qalat* (Addis Abeba, 1962 E.C.), "elf" is a sum equivalent to ten thousand, and "waqet" is a unit of measurement for gold weighing twenty eight grams. The ransom of "elf waqet" of gold would hence be equivalent to 280,000 grams (or 280 kilograms) of gold.
4. Seymour Chatman defines "points of view" as "the physical place or ideological situation or practical life-orientation to which narrative events stand in relation Point of view does not mean expression; it only means the perspective in terms of which the expres-

sion is made. The expression and the perspective need not be lodged in the same person" (Chatman 153). Of the three types of point of view which he distinguishes, the two that would be used in this study are: perceptual point of view, "literal: through someone's eyes (perception)"; and conceptual point of view, "figurative: through someone's world view (ideology: conceptual system)" (151).

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The First-Born of Amharic Fiction: A Revaluation of Afewwork Gabraysus' *T'obbiya*¹

Yonas Admassu



INTRODUCTION

The Ethiopian turn of the present century (1907/8 Gregorian calendar) witnessed the appearance on the Ethiopian literary scene of what is now considered to be the first known Amharic prose fiction. The title given to it by its author, Afewwork Gabrayasus, is *Lebb-wälläd Tarik*, a title, it seems, deliberately indicative of the introduction of a new “generic mode” into Amharic story-telling tradition.² Equalled in popularity as well as in significance only by very few works in contemporary Amharic prose fiction, the book still stands as a rare work of art that Amharic literature has produced. Its primary significance lies in its successfully capturing, and fictionally representing, the rather elusive and controversial theme of the founding of an empire, very much echoing the mythical allusion in the Bible to

Ethiopia, later laboriously woven into a legitimizing semi-religious legend in the *Kebre Negest* ("The Glory of the Kings"), a copious work of the 15th century to which Ethiopian Emperors, especially since Yohannes IV, turned for an authoritative endorsement of their ascendancy to (or usurpation of) the throne.³ Afework Gabraysus' work can be safely considered as a contemporary fictional interpretation of the myth of the founding of a unified community and its subsequent legitimization as "the chosen of God," to mention but one of the most recurrent themes in such foundational narratives.

My aim in this essay is twofold. The first one is a matter of introducing the work to a readership that is by and large unaware of its existence. Consequently, I shall start out with a synopsis of the story for the benefit of such a readership. My second aim is a partial analysis, rather compactly framed, of the work itself with a view to bringing out its central thematic concern. The analysis also attempts to answer some questions about what I consider to be misperceptions about, or misreadings of, the work regarding its moral as well as political significance.

SYNOPSIS

The story, revolving around the tribulations of a once prosperous family, confronts us, at first sight, with the simplicity of a tale. Yet it would be difficult, maybe even erroneous, to classify it as a simple tale. If anything, the work defies classification. It reads at once as myth, legend, adventure, romance, fantasy, all put together rather hastily, but with a clearly defined moral and political intent that only invites, (indeed, demands at every turn it negotiates), the reader's serious interpretive participation.

The plot, though following a general linear pattern, develops in three stages. If *T'obbiya* were a play, it would definitely consist of three acts, with a prologue and an epilogue to boot. The first stage, relating to the disruption motif, as the narrator puts it, deals with one of the ferocious battles that used to be waged between Christians and "infidels," in which the latter prevail and the army of the former is completely routed. Three of the four generals of the Christian army along with thousands of their soldiers are killed. The fourth, whose predicament sets the narrative in motion, is captured and sold into

slavery to one of the “infidels.” This stage ends with the discovery by the “infidel” slave owner of the “noble” background of his newly acquired slave, the general. Accordingly, he dispatches a message to the general’s family (a mother and her male and female twins, Wahid⁴ and T’obbiya, respectively) to the effect that he would grant the general his liberty on condition that his family come up with ten thousand “ounces” of gold. This is a preposterous demand, to be sure, given the poverty the family had fallen into following the total destruction their country had suffered. But this devoted Christian family puts its faith in their Lord and goes about the equally impossible task of obtaining the general’s release. The son, Wahid, who sets out in search of a merchant into whose service he hopes to work as a muleteer, is turned down on account of his youth. In the process, however, he lands himself a generous gift of a bag of gold from the same merchant who seems to understand what it means to have had and lost.

Stage two begins with the hands of a god at work; the general returns back home mysteriously one night. We learn that the merchant who gave Wahid the bag of gold earlier is the same person who paid the ransom money to obtain the general’s release. Wahid takes it upon himself to seek out that merchant and express his gratitude and pay him back for his benevolence. As fate would have it, however, not only does Wahid fail to locate the merchant, but the arduous journey that he barely endures only lands him into slavery in the land of the “infidels.”

Stage three involves yet another quest; this time the general and his daughter, T’obbiya, set out in search of Wahid, who they fear might be dead. Their search becomes fruitless and they end up being captured by the enemy. Fortunately, however, the two Christians are first found in their hiding place by none other than the king of the “infidels” himself, who stretches his royal benevolence over them and saves them from sure death by the swords of his blood-thirsty soldiers. After an unspecified but definitely long period of time, the king of the “infidels” finds out all about T’obbiya and her father (especially about T’obbiya who, until later in the story, remains disguised as a boy). The king promises to find Wahid and the kindly merchant, and he does. He converts to Christianity later and marries T’obbiya, while Wahid marries the king’s niece. The

community of "infidels" finally becomes Christianized, and peace descends and everybody lives happily ever after. This, in its descriptive simplicity, is the plot line of *T'obbiya*.

DISCUSSION

There is very little room for doubt that the tale-like simplicity of the plot has greatly contributed to the general neglect this "firstborn" of Amharic prose fiction has suffered. The same factor has also contributed to some of the unwarranted comments and observations made by the few who attempted to say anything at all about the work. It would, therefore, be worthwhile to start this analysis with observations about some of the remarks made by some scholars. Though what I consider to be unwarranted observations about *T'obbiya* have also been applied to the whole gamut of Amharic prose fiction, both spatial and temporal considerations require that I limit myself to the observations made specifically about the work in question.

Most of the research on *T'obbiya*, so far as I can tell, has been limited to accounts, often in the form of documentation, of its linguistic aspects, morphology, syntax and semantics, with very little regard to it as a literary discourse. The significance of the work in its social context seems to have been either little understood, or simply considered not worth the serious interpretive effort it really deserves.

I have found some of the remarks to be unsatisfactory in some cases and outright disappointing in others. Isolated instances in the book have been taken out of context and subjected to "criticisms" in a rather prescriptive fashion, such as to tell us what the author should or should not have done in order to make his work "more complete" or amenable to our "tastes." Hardly a sensible approach, for our primary task as critics and interpreters, is neither to "edit," nor "embellish," nor "correct" an already existing text. Such an arbitrary approach also runs the risk of confusing personal taste with critical interpretation.

Rather than engage in one-on-one combat with the authors of such opinions and "criticisms," I will let them serve as points of departure for my own observations about the work; in the process, I shall also refute some of the arguments that would be unwarranted if the book were read more closely. I shall start with a relatively lengthy essay by Luigi Fusella.

While granting the undisputed mastery of language and technique Afework Gabrayasus displays in his attempt at prose fiction, Fusella nevertheless “chastises” the author for falling, on more than one occasion, “*dans des anachronismes et naïvetés qui seraient mieux à leur place dans un conte pour enfants, public auquel, certainement, le roman n’était pas destiné*” (Fusella 27).

As an example of these “naïvetés,” he cites the episode in which Wahid (the male protagonist) confronts a lion created by his own fear:

. . .le protagoniste, tout seul dans un désert, pour épouvanter un lion inexistant, se met à crier. . .avec différents timbres de voix, pour faire croire qu’il n’est pas seul et finalement, pour ne pas être mangé par ce même lion imaginaire, il fait semblant d’être mort. (26)

Fusella goes on to add that “*l’auteur, très souvent, commet l’erreur de répéter, sans aucune nécessité* [my emphasis], *plusieurs fois, la même idée*” (29). In a similar vein, Wright, another Ethiopicist, criticizes Gabrayasus for his “tendency to over-invent in the use of words in new ways which brought about *unnecessary originalities* in spelling and usage” (Kane 9; my emphasis).⁵ It is possible that both Fusella and Wright have some instances in mind when they talk about the author’s “naïvetés” or “over-invention,” but for the purposes of this paper I shall limit myself to these and similar comments made by other scholars as well.

Let us put first things first and start with the alleged *naïveté* of Afework Gabrayasus as it relates particularly to Wahid’s encounter with the imaginary lion and submit, on the contrary, that the episode in question is of serious import, not simply in terms of “objectifying” Wahid’s state of mind at the particular moment but also in terms of one of the themes—that of the “hero being tested,” to which I shall return below. That this contention is made on my part does not in any way nullify Fusella’s claim that the story, at its simplest, is indeed addressed (or addressable) to children. Any such pleasure as school children might derive is unlikely to go beyond the “adventures” of the protagonist, specifically the suspense his confrontation with the imaginary lion holds for their impres-

sionable minds. But to deny this episode the serious critical attention it deserves, and to relegate it to the level of a mere exercise in “*naïveté*” of an overzealous “literary rookie,” would be, to put it mildly, an “underreading” of what figures to me as integral to the ethical and political concerns of the work.⁶

As for the “error” of repeating the same idea “unnecessarily,” one could only wish that Fusella as well as Wright had made it clearer than they have, but using the word “unnecessarily” as the key term here, one must wonder how they went about determining what is necessary and what superfluous. I also ask how that could be done, at least in this case, without falling victim to a point of view that leans for its support on a literary/critical tradition and reading experience considerably at variance with that of our immediate target. My reading of *T’obbiya* has shown me nothing that I could categorically dismiss as unnecessary, without, however, denying the possibility of such weaknesses as the author might suffer from, particularly when it comes to what is conventionally known as authorial intervention. But that hardly should take precedence over the overall understanding of the work as one, in at least some aspect, with a definite moral purpose.

While scholars like Fusella and Wright speak of “unnecessary” repetitions or details, Fikre Tolossa, another student of Amharic literature, who sets out to show that *T’obbiya* is not a “realistic” piece of work, fares no better when he asserts that the work is lacking “truthful details,” one criterion by which, it is assumed, a “realistic” work is defined. The question of whether *T’obbiya* is written in the “realistic” mode or not is hardly relevant to the interpretation I am trying to offer. Such a “generic approach” certainly has a bearing on our interpretation, as it helps determine what (or what not) to expect from the book. According to Fikre Tolossa:

In the first place, contrary to a realistic piece of work, *there are too few truthful details in it. The physical and psychological conditions of the characters are not portrayed in detail.* True, *T’obbiya* is portrayed exaggeratedly beautiful [sic], and Wahid’s fear in the forest at night is reflected superbly. The king’s jester, whom obviously the author hates, is fantastically portrayed as an ugly creature (63).

If Tolossa’s argument is that because the story lacks in “truth-

ful details" we cannot, therefore, classify it as "realistic," one should not find it difficult to grant him that much, whether or not one agrees with his definition of "realism," a non-issue, for the purposes of this paper any way. What one cannot grant him is his claim that *T'obbiya* has "too few details." If anything, *T'obbiya* is quite full of details, with quite a dose of "realistic" depictions. If *T'obbiya* does not meet the demands of "realism," so be it, but not for the reason Tolossa attributes to it. To this claim our answer (mine, at any rate) must be an emphatic no! For me, the question here is how the details contribute to the formal structure as well as to the moral content of the work.

Yet another argument, rather categorical in its claim, and one that betrays some degree of *naïveté*, is given by Molvaër. According to him, *T'obbiya* "can hardly be called a realistic work," and "the book is *valued for its style*, and the author *may have written it as a purely artistic exercise; it is "art for art's sake"* (8; my emphasis). Given the social and cultural context in which Amharic literature is firmly grounded, to speak of "art for art's sake" is a misreading of that context in which and through which literary works come into being. In fact, Molvaër recognizes this fundamental characteristic of the literature in question. In the introductory chapter of his book he says that

Ethiopian authors of fiction are strongly concerned with the social and cultural life of their time, and it would not do Amharic literature full justice to evaluate it only on aesthetic grounds. This literature is not purely art for art's sake, or for entertainment; proper appreciation of the modern Ethiopian literary scene can be gained if one relates fictional writing to society (1).

It is true that one can recognize this characteristic of Amharic literature (a characteristic shared by most literatures at "infancy") and still hold some works to be exceptions, a very difficult and even futile task, I presume. First, to look, in the case of Amharic, for such exceptions in the literary stock of such an early period as that in which *T'obbiya* was written, a period when the literature had hardly emerged from the grips of religious and moral "incantations" with definite didactic purposes, sounds a little bit preposterous — or as the Amharic saying

goes, it is like trying “to collect fuel-dung where no cattle grazed!” Second, even when we allow for exceptions, *T’obbiya* would not be our candidate because, as Fusella correctly points out in his essay, the moral/ethical purpose of the narrative is succinctly summarized by the epigraph (*distique*, as Fusella calls it) at the beginning of the book:

Le but du livre, qui a une intention moralisante, est tout entier condensé dans le distique par lequel il commence: “Le bienfaiteur prête, le malfaiteur ne reçoit rien. Celui qui donne, ne donne pas mais prête. (27)

That much is clear about the work, and at least that much must be owned as a starting point for our interpretation. What is even more curious, however, is that Molvaër himself points out, while totally contradicting his “art for art’s sake” thesis, that

T’obbiya . . . can be allegorically taken to be about Ethiopia (“*T’obbiya*” is a colloquial form of “Ethiopia.”) As the girl by that name becomes instrumental in converting a pagan country, so Ethiopia is God’s chosen country to bring light to the world. (165)

I am in agreement with this observation, but only to the extent that it offers one plausible way of interpreting *T’obbiya* through an understanding of what *T’obbiya*, the eponymous heroine of the story, represents or symbolizes. This interpretation of *T’obbiya*, via the symbolic role the heroine plays, is legitimately drawn from the coda (for lack of a better term) at the end of the story, a coda which must combine with the epigraph cited above to form a whole that would enable us to understand the ethical as well as the political project of the story. The coda runs:

band näggadé säbäb hullu danä
band set meknyat hullu ammänä
band negus qal ityoppiya qomä. (68)

(because of one merchant [‘s good deed] everybody was
delivered
because of one woman everybody believed
[and] by the Word of one king Ethiopia was established)

If we have any doubt as to why Gabrayasus wrote the book, this should more than make it clear. The question now becomes one of interpreting *T'obbiya* in light of these two suggestive "codes," upon which we cannot but draw for our understanding and interpretation of the work as a whole.

I therefore submit that the overall meaning of the story is framed between what I would like to call the "twin codes," the epigraph and the coda, which in their combination correspond to the twin protagonists and their functions to give us "the whole moral of the story." Each is necessary to the other and to everything that falls between. A recognition of this connection of necessity is indispensable for our understanding of the story.

The moral conveyed by the epigraph (ethical and educational in purpose) serves as the germinal idea which becomes the prime mover of the action. It generates a story divided into a number of episodes around which the linear plot unfolds (albeit in a very linear fashion), and from which the general theme flows and takes concrete shape. Its significance, in terms of structure, lies in the fact that the "virtues" extolled therein (essentially ethical in concern) gradually and progressively merge with the flow of the plot to lead us to the second half, the political ideal, projected at the end of the story. I read this ideal as the establishment of a state, or of a community, out of the conflict between the two opposing forces of value — virtue and vice — and one in which the balance between power (essentially vicious) and love (a matter of virtue in the work's context) is at least ideally maintained, where the excesses of power are tempered by "love." Love, here, is considered, of course, not in its sexual or erotic dimension but as a component of the "virtues" extolled (via the two protagonists) and later incorporated into the Christian ethic of love thy neighbor, etc. What is spun out of the first (the epigraph), leading to a disruption of a presupposed harmony, is woven and patched by the second (the coda) into "harmony regained." These "twin codes" serve both as rhetorical and thematic devices, moving along parallel lines that meet, as it were, at infinity, the ideal at the center of which is *T'obbiya*. (The line making her of central importance is structurally positioned in the middle of the tristich comprising the coda.) For *T'obbiya* read *T'obbiya* and you have the ideal state, the ideal community — of what else, but Ethiopia. It is within

this framework that I would like to approach the various elements that go into the work's constitution. I shall, however, limit myself to those aspects already addressed by the authors whose observations I cited earlier and offer my interpretation as one possibility among many.

To begin, then, let us examine Wahid's confrontation with the imaginary lion, which Fusella dismisses as an example of the "*naïvetés*" Afework Gabrayasus tends "to fall into" and see if, on the contrary, it is not as serious in its purpose as it is "stylistically colorful." I propose two ways of interpreting the episode. First, there is the more directly accessible psychological predicament of Wahid, the intensity of his fear and its projection in the *form of a lion*. Gabrayasus' talent lies in his imagination of this imagination of the character and giving it concrete form by evoking an image that, for all practical purposes, i.e., in its effect on the protagonist, is as real as a lion. Instead of *telling* us how afraid the protagonist is, he "shows" us fear itself by taking us into the protagonist's inner self. Its effectiveness as a psychological depiction and, as such, its ability to create suspense as well as elicit the reader's empathy with the protagonist's predicament cannot be underestimated.

As a corollary to this, however, we can attach significance to the confrontation being of a particular nature. Afework Gabrayasus does not say that Wahid saw any "*awre*" (beast), but a *specific* one, a lion. Among the choices at his disposal, *jib* (hyena), *näbir* (leopard), *anbäsa* (lion), the author settles for *anbäsa*, the "king" of the jungle. This takes us (there is no other way out here) outside of the text and into the cultural domain upon which we must draw for our interpretive strategy. Admittedly, any of the beasts named would suffice to instill fear when one as young as the protagonist is traveling alone at night. In the logic of the story, however, which draws upon the cultural code of equating "manhood" with "courage" and "bravery," Wahid's fear, thus depicted, *underscores* the importance of the value upheld by the cultural community which gives birth to the story. In the end, it seems, our concern lies less in the "psychology of fear" (much less Wahid's fear) as it does in the concept of "manhood" as one of the virtues extolled by the culture informing the text. It does not matter that the protagonist is presented to us, in the "saving grace" voice of the narrator, as only "*chorqa*" (literally, "tender," meaning too young

not to show so much fear). The fact remains that the protagonist is not yet “a man;” and this fact is recognized as something embarrassing, even to himself:

“min yihon:bägäzza firhate babiché nurwal mäwdäqé inkwan säw alayyänñ bägäzza firhatu wänd lij hono indet yiwädqall” iyyalä iyyätädämmämä guzowin qät’t’älä. (15)

(“Could it be that I passed out just from my own fear? It is a good thing nobody was watching [for] how could one be a man and yet pass out?” Thus wondering he resumed his journey. (Translation is mine unless otherwise indicated.)

The scene is a record of his *realization* of this weakness which he must grow out of if he is to be “a man.” He is only too happy not just that he emerges unscathed but, even more importantly, that there *are no witnesses* to this embarrassing situation, except for a partridge that he scares out of the bush by the stone he throws to see if there is any lion at all. This embarrassment and its recognition by Wahid is the beginning of his own awareness that he has a long way to go before he is man enough to call himself *wänd* (brave, courageous). This takes place on the psychological and, indirectly, the cultural level.

In an attempt to “save” Wahid from embarrassment, the narrator “volunteers” an explanation to the situation in which one word stands out. I am not suggesting, nor is there any clue to the contrary either, that the author consciously selected that word. Whether consciously employed or not, I shall use the word as a starting point in my strategy and offer my interpretation of the episode on a second level, since the plausibility of this strategy is already encoded in the cultural context of the word. The word is underscored in the “explanation” the narrative voice offers: “*min yading / Wahid **firdu** näw*” (68). The word, better left untranslated, has the connotation, among others, of “suffering,” in the sense of undergoing both physical and psychological pain, the price that the “hero” must pay in order to reach his goal, to achieve what he sets out to do. In a sense, too, he has a burden that he carries, that of finding the merchant-benefactor and thanking him on behalf of his family, even if that means engaging in the menial task of loading and unloading mules. Let me anticipate myself and suggest that given the “salvation” at the end, Wahid’s burden, in part, reads

like "carrying his own cross."

Consequently, I find it plausible to argue that the episode in which the confrontation takes place draws upon the familiar theme of "the hero being tested," a theme common to both the tale and the myth. However, unlike the superhuman hero of the myth, Wahid is represented as just the ordinary "human being" that he is, with weaknesses very much like ours. The episode holds, in a suppressed form, what we find in tales pertaining to "rites of passage" as we know them in most African folk tales, in which case Wahid's predicament can be read as such an initiation into "manhood." Hence our protagonist's "odyssey" in which the psychological torment he goes through becomes part of the test yet to come and which he must pass. Determining what forces await him in the dark (more figuratively than literally) becomes part of the test he must undergo, for only through such knowledge can the "hero" even be able to map out a strategy by which to tackle his task and overcome his difficulties.

Only after undergoing several more tests does Wahid, as we know, succeed not only in finding his benefactor (who is duly rewarded) but in emerging a fully developed man. Perseverance, endurance, hope, and faith in the face of danger, including a near-death hunger and being beaten at a certain merchant's camp for allegedly stealing a mule, being sold into slavery, being subjected to the menial work that he never before knew as a youth in his father's house, all these add up to form the "hero's virtues." His sufferings, read almost like the sufferings of the "Son of Man!" And his suffering pays, since our "hero" at the end of the story is an "elevated" and honored man in the new community. Thus I say that the test, indeed, begins with the confrontation with the "lion" as the test of all tests, psychological and emotional, since it says a lot about how prepared and ready to persevere Wahid would be in the carrying out of his task and the fulfillment of his one wish, but only as part of the general salvation to which it obviously contributes. This, I submit, is the name of the "game" in that not-so-brief and seemingly fantastic or dream-like confrontation.

What of T'obbiya and the way she is depicted? In other words, what of the "exaggeration," of which Fikre Tolossa speaks, with which her "beauty" is described? Indeed, the passage describing her beauty is one of the most "colorful" of pas-

sages that Amharic prose fiction has known, and if the casual reader is transfixed by its "radiance" to a point where he/she is rendered blind to the value-laden significance it has to the moral purpose of the story, we need not be surprised. But for one whose purpose in reading *T'obbiya* goes beyond a casual reading, for the critic who goes beyond matters of mere style, the very blind spots created by the "radiance" of the depiction are the very things with which to begin one's interpretation. The description of T'obbiya's "beauty" has a direct bearing not only on the eventual conversion of the king, but also on the political "ideal" projected by the narrative.

If Wahid (and his "odyssey") gives flesh to the moral/ethical import of the story as contained in the epigraph at the beginning of the book, T'obbiya, his identical twin, becomes the symbol of as well as the agent for the realization of the political ideal summarized by the coda at the end of the story. If Wahid's role reads as one of causality, T'obbiya's reads as that of effect. The combination of the two is a must for the structure of the plot as well as for the development of the theme, the founding of a fully developed and "harmonious" community of peoples. In political terms, we are witnessing the founding of the ideal state, in which sense *T'obbiya* displays an affinity to a founding myth as well as one which legitimizes the values held in esteem by the ideological world of the text. When examined within this framework, when looked at in terms of ideology (values), T'obbiya's "beauty" enters another dimension. That the author's biases in this respect come out as clearly as they are unpretentious need not be belabored.

Of central concern here is not T'obbiya's "search" for her brother, without minimizing its indispensable role in the unfolding of the plot, but what she symbolizes. Therefore her "actions" are secondary, relative to those of both Wahid and her own character. Our attention cannot but be focussed on how she is characterized. By describing T'obbiya the way he did, the author is not giving us a tour of her physical features (though there is no gainsaying he does that too) but "raising" her a couple of notches in order to put her out of reach of the ordinary, or the mundane. One can't help being reminded of the *mälk'e*⁷ tradition, to which our heroine's depiction has an affinity, at least in its mode of presentation if not temperament. Indeed, the sublimity of her looks is not so much at issue as is the aes-

thetics of the values she represents. She is simply perfect, better yet, she is “perfection” personified. As such, her “sexuality” fades into the background, giving place to the “virtues” of which she becomes the quintessence:

*indiyaw igziabher däss yaläw ilät tächänqonna tät’äbbibo
särto näfs yäzärrabbat timäslalläch inji indä säw
yätäfät’t’äräch atmäslim näbbär::bäkäntu näw:T’obbiya siga
tämälbäswa bästäqär amälwa kännäkirubel yäqirb zimdinna
yämmiqqot’at’t’är yimäsl näbbär (T’obbia 47-8; my emphasis).*

(Well, [when one looks at T’obbiya] she did not look as if God created her like a human being; rather she looked as if God, in the happiest of His moments, took great care and pain to mold and carve her, and He later blew into her a [special] soul. It is futile [to speak about her beauty], for except for the fact that she was clothed in flesh like all men, her character seemed to place her in a special league with the Cherubim.)

As engrossed as God is in His creation of this “divine object of art,” even He, in all His omnipotence, is not perfect enough to find any substitute for ordinary flesh to clothe his “Idea” with. So he has to give this idea another quality, *amäl*, (character, as in modesty, for instance) — which places her closer to the world of the angels who are not of this earth and, therefore, cannot be sexually defined. Although, in this sense, her “sexuality” recedes to the background, T’obbiya is also a human being with feminine attributes which, in the realistic domain of the story, become the primary agents for the attraction and subsequent conversion of the “pagan” king. As an “entity” in whom the carnal and the spiritual are “perfectly balanced,” her role becomes one of standing for “Virtue” as the ideal state of being to be desired by all. Beauty turned virtue is also what eventually constitutes the political ideal of the perfect state. What appears to be a mere physical description connects as a discourse precisely on the perfect state that Afework Gabrayasus proposes in his own eccentric way.

As for the depiction of the court jester and the dwarf, executed with brilliant malevolence, little need be said. On one hand, such a depiction in “ugly” terms highlights T’obbiya’s “beauty.” On the other hand, its juxtaposition with her depiction as virtuous figures the “inherent” vice of the enemy, “the

other." The physical ugliness of this "other" is transformed, by mere stroke of imagination, into the moral attribute of viciousness, just as T'obbiya's physical attribute is transformed, by the same token, into the moral attribute of virtue. This juxtaposition of the "beautiful" with the "ugly" is also conceptually necessary. The one doesn't exist without the other. The bottom line, however, is not so much the "ugliness" of the jester and the dwarf, at least as the narrator sees it, as it is the "beauty" and "virtue" as well as the "resoluteness"⁸ displayed by T'obbiya and her father when the latter particularly stands up to the jester's mockery of the Christian religion. The virtues of T'obbiya and her father, with the father's last gesture as the icing, simply lure the king of the "pagans" to a point where he comes to the defense of the "poor" Christian victims. By which, of course, Afework Gabrayasus "prepares" us for what follows.

Without taking this background into consideration, it would indeed be preposterous to suggest that a conquering king, pagan, therefore cruel, at that, would embrace the religion of his helpless victims and assimilate their values, which is exactly what must happen. Gabrayasus' somewhat "sly" strategy, but even more the text's "ideological foundation," would make the conversion anything but an impossibility.

First of all, arguing from the perspective of sexuality, the king's passion for T'obbiya is so intense that he would do anything to get her (once he discovers that she is a woman, of course). Second, T'obbiya and her father are first and foremost Christians who put their religion, the cause of Christ, ahead of everything. The king's attraction to her grows and his passion turns to "genuine" love and admiration upon finding that T'obbiya, whom he could easily force into marriage, is as resolute in her faith and conviction as she is beautiful. When it comes to her faith, in particular, she is even more adamant than her father. But she is also humble and modest in her disposition even while "cringing" at the idea of being proposed to by a "pagan." But she is not afraid to just say "no," fully aware what the consequences would be. After "thinking about the king's proposal to her," she politely writes to him that she is not deserving of such an honor, being of "humble birth" as she is. Thus T'obbiya:

. . . *inem yäizzihin alaḥi alām dāsta tāmālkiche kiristosin*

yalawwäqänna yaltät'mm'aqä nigus magbat kiristosn mäkdatinna yäzälälämun hiywätawi kibren mänaq yihonibbiññal siläzih ijjen wädäigziabher izäräggallähu inji laltät'ämmäqänna kiristosin lalawwäqä ijjen alsät'im indiyawim bäiwnätu mähalla aläbbiñ ñinna ayhoniliññim ayzänubbiññ. (T'obbia 47-8; my emphasis)

(...[as I see it] for me to be tempted by the ephemeral pleasures of this earth and marry a king who does not know Christ and who is not baptized is tantamount to renouncing Christ as well as the glory of Eternal Life . Thus do I stretch my hands to God [rather than] surrender to someone who is not Christianized. In fact, I have already pledged myself and, therefore, it is something I cannot consent to. So I beseech you not to hold it against me.)

Marrying a “pagan” king, even when such a king has only been a “*dägg adragi*” (good natured, kind, benevolent) is not worth the eternal damnation one would face by renouncing one’s “true” faith. Thus reasoning, T’obbiya leaves her fate in the hands of her God, and she therefore refuses to “give her hand” in marriage. But she also refuses to surrender (*ijjen alsät'im*). The Amharic word operates on two levels. Refusal to marry a pagan king and *refusal to surrender* to a “pagan,” king or no king. Further, taking the contextual meaning of the word *arämäne* (“pagan” or “infidel”) and extending it to include such notions as “barbaric” and “cruel,” it is easily understood what the consequences of such a refusal, however politely worded, would be but, even more, it underscores the significance of the refusal as it relates to T’obbiya’s character formation. T’obbiya is not only a woman of beauty but also a person of principle. Resolve and integrity, as well as modesty, are virtues which are woven into the fabric of her character. But the scene also anticipates what conditions must be fulfilled on the part of the king. Not only conversion is needed, but the virtues she stands for demand the same correspondence on the king’s part. Again, ideology makes its unabashed presence felt. From the moment of the king’s first appearance on the scene, we are told about his looks as well as his precocity; and here lies his virtual (and virtuous) difference from the “others.” First, he is not one who would go back on his words, as a king. This is drawn from the rather curious logic, definitely a result of the author’s ideolog-

ical bias, that ideally kings keep their promises. Second, the king is modest in his ways, starting with the way he is dressed, as opposed to the superficial pomp of his attendants. In short he has everything by way of *amäl* ("character" or "good conduct") that would make him a perfect match for T'obbiya. That Afework Gabrayasus seems to force the issue need not surprise us, since in the world of such a tale anything is possible. Again, the hands of some god are always at work, as far as the tale goes. But more importantly, the good, virtuous community later to be established must have its equal in a virtuous king.

Given this scenario, their marriage, consequently, becomes a marriage of virtues, or more correctly, a marriage of power to virtue, a balance that is perfectly and legitimately kept in the ideal world the author has created. Power lies in salvation, not only in the theological sense but also in the moral/ethical sense. If virtue, represented by the Christian ethics of "goodness" and "love" and symbolized in the "person" of T'obbiya, is to be the prime factor in this process, power, as represented by might and symbolized by the king, becomes the second factor, giving us the marriage of ethics to politics. Virtue tempers power and power, buttresses the foundation of that virtue.

In strictly political terms, the king, no less than T'obbiya, serves as a vehicle for the author's own outlook and world view. The ideal state to be forged as a result of such a marriage cannot, given his bias, be anything but the "virtuous" Christian state that the Ethiopia of the myths has for centuries been viewed to be. T'obbiya, the beautiful and virtuous, married to a powerful and precocious king, translates into "Ethiopia, who has always stretched her hands to God," a state in which the power of its sovereigns lies not just in their "wardrobe" but even more in their faith in the Lord. Consequently, when the sovereign finds salvation and, through it, confirms his power, the community he leads finds salvation through him (as he is the first to convert and others follow) and recognizes its own power. It is in this sense that *T'obbiya* can be read as a work of serious political and ideological import. It is valued neither just for its style, nor as another work of "art for art's sake," in which the author was engaged in aimlessly displaying his rhetorical skills.

A much closer reading than I have done here, I am sure, will offer more insight into this work's significance and mean-

ing on several levels. One possibility, for instance, is the elaboration of the notion of being “God’s chosen” to “bring light” to the world, as Molvaër has correctly pointed out, a notion that we are familiar with in the *Kibre Negest* as it relates particularly to the legend of the Queen of Sheba. That topic, however, is much more complex and in need of a more thorough investigation than the present forum allows, and must await another occasion.

NOTES

1. Throughout this article I shall substitute *T’obbiya* for the original title given by the author, on account both of its brevity and popularity.
2. The words constituting the title, as used by the author, suggest a meaning closer to the general term “fiction” than to the more specific generic-classificatory term “novel.” Today the term *lebb-wälläd* has been appropriated by students of Amharic literature to mean novel. While this is the popular understanding of the term, the need for specialized studies, however, has of late dictated such qualifications as *räjjim lebb-wälläd* (literally “long fiction”) for the novel and *achir lebb-wälläd* (literally “short fiction”) for the short story. The word *tarik* also means history, as a factual occurrence of events, thereby necessitating the distinction provided by the addition of the adjectival phrase *lebb-wälläd*. The term is also used to mean “fictional” or “imaginary” (vs. true account) as evidenced by the “apologetic” one frequently finds in prefaces to Amharic works to the effect that any similarity of the characters and their names to people living or dead is purely coincidental, a practice made even more popular in later years, notably to evade the wrath of the ubiquitous censors. Afework Gabrayasus’ choice of the title for his miniscule fiction seems to anticipate this later convention.
3. An annotated translation of the *Kebrä Nägäst* has been made by Sir Wallis Budge, under the title *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menilek*. The book is said to have been compiled by one Neburä Id Yesehaq whose political motives for undertaking the project are made explicit both in the introduction and in the body of the text(s).
4. The name Wahid, meaning “one,” is clearly an allusion to the “Unity and Harmony” issuing from the marriage of T’obbiya and the converted king of the “infidels.” Read together with T’obbiya, the name anticipates the modern slogan of “a united, indivisible Ethiopia” that is still the staple of many a political debate among the Ethiopian elite.
5. It is worth noting that the “unnecessary originalities,” whether in

“spelling” or usage, of which Wright speaks are neither unnecessary nor “original.” The Amharic Afework Gabrayasus uses in his narrative is not a matter of stylistic idiosyncrasy on his part; he actually uses the spoken form of Amharic in the area of Zāgé where he was born and got his early schooling. What he has done beyond that may be safely assumed to be nothing more than manipulating the syntax to supply the narrative with a “neater” grammatical structure than the every day speech patterns of the community seem to provide (or even care about). What Wright probably had in mind when he made his comments was the “standardized” grammar and usage of Amharic as it is spoken and written in Addis Abeba against which all other “versions” or “dialects” are judged and found to be wanting. This conception of language, as I myself was to discover only recently, has contributed to the “rhetorical drought” from which not a small number of recent fictional outputs in Amharic suffer. Quite a few readers have shied away from reading an otherwise good novel, published in Los Angeles, because the language used is that of the so-called Gondar “dialect.” The book which uses “raw” spoken Amharic of the said area has made me think twice before I ever again make bold claims about the “distinction” between “ordinary” and “literary” languages. As for “spelling,” I can only assume Wright’s meaning and point out an instance in which words spelled one way in “standard” Amharic are spelled differently in Afework’s “dialect”: *sar* (grass) and *set* (woman, feminine) are spelled *esar* and *eset*, respectively, in Gabrayasus’ “dialect.” But the word *sāw* (man, person, someone) is spelled the same way in both “standard” and non standard “dialect.” Afework Gabrayasus, consequently is not guilty of infusing Amharic with “unnecessary originalities in spelling!”

6. Fusella’s misperception about the episode in question and, consequently, its implication with regard to the “moral” of the work, I believe, issues from yet another misperception that the work in question is indeed a novel (“*roman*” as opposed to “*conte pour enfants*”). That the work is not a novel, in the sense of the term as currently used as a generic classification, is not arguable. If anything it is an example *par excellence*, at least as far as Amharic goes, of the range of possibilities available to a writer of mixing generic modes. One may even go so far as to say that, when it comes to particular texts, the attempt to freeze them in a rigid fashion into one or the other of the genres may simply be futile. Whatever characterization one gives *T’obbiya*, it is still erroneous to equate “seriousness” with the novel and “naivete” with “*contes pour enfants*,” for what are we to do with the significance(s) of all the tales of the world that still pervade and arrest our imaginations?

7. *Mälk'e* is a form of religious poetry specifically composed in reverence to Jesus, Mary, the angels and saints. For instance, the poetry to venerate Mary is called *mälk'a-Maryam* (literally, "the appearance of Mary"). As the word itself suggests, the poetry describes the physical appearance of the "subject" beginning with the hair and going all the way down to the toes, endowing each part with a sacred attribute or some life-giving force. Afework Gabrayasus' description of T'obbiya's physical beauty draws upon this tradition and compares her hair, for instance, to the lush grain just before harvest time, suggesting, here too, that her beauty is more than a matter of sexual attraction.
8. It is important to note, here, that these attributes, through sheer contiguity with the symbolic T'obbiya, are not only interchangeable but seem to flow out of the one quality with which the author primarily endows her: beauty — which serves as the dominant image, and the mention of which necessarily evokes the other qualities as they operate on the level of the texts overall ideological configuration.

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Review of Molvaer's *Tradition and Change in Ethiopia*

Hailu Fullass



Previous studies of Amharic literature (e.g., Kane, 1975; Gerard, 1971) were chiefly bibliographic and made few valid statements concerning the literary aspects of Amharic fiction. In the main, their attempts at literary analysis and evaluation were marked by uncritical generalizations and statements of an anthropological character which do not reflect serious and accurate observations.

Molvaer's book, similar to Kane and Gerard, is also a study on Amharic fiction or creative writing. His book differs from all other such studies, however, in that he deliberately refrains from discussing the literary aspects of Amharic literature. Whatever observations he makes about style or characterization or plot are incidental to his socio-ethnographic interest. As Molvaer himself declares (ix), his sole interest is to learn "about the author or society in and by which" each of the

pieces he has chosen as a source is produced. His analysis focuses on content in a sociocultural framework.

There are four important sections in the main body of the book; an introductory section (1-19), which defines the aims and scope of the study, briefly discusses previous work on Amharic literature, names twelve authors whose work forms the basis of Molvaer's study, and lists abbreviations and mode of transcription of the Amharic version of the Ethiopic syllabary. The second and longest section (23-161), Molvaer's part one, is entitled "Traditional Aspects of Modern Ethiopia" and is divided into four chapters. Here the author gives a picture of traditional aspects of life in Ethiopia as portrayed in selected works. Using extensive quotes, Molvaer delineates aspects of the structure of Ethiopian society at the macro-level of class relations and at the micro-level of family and individual interactions. His next section (165-242), part two, also has four chapters and emphasizes how the selected authors perceive both internally motivated and externally induced changes in the traditional way of life. The fourth section is a conclusion which summarizes the main points of the preceding two sections. The book also contains a list of the 63 books that Molvaer used as primary sources (246-247), a bibliography (248-253), a glossary of Amharic terms (254-260), an index of the quoted passages (261), and a general index (262-268).

The book is beautifully printed and the contents are arranged in a clear format. There are very few misprints of English words. Within the system adopted by Molvaer, transcription of Amharic words is very accurate. The errors that have escaped his attention pertain almost entirely to gemination. For instance, the book has *zangadda* (38) for *zangada*, *nagadras* (41) for *naggadras*; *fatteno daras* (256) for *fatno daras*; there are few more errors of this type both in the main body of the book as well as in the glossary or index of Amharic terms, as Molvaer calls it.

DISCUSSION

The social anthropologist or ethnographer who knows Ethiopia may find nothing original or of much interest in the book. The author himself does not claim to have uncovered new sociocultural facts or to have gained or provided new insights into the traditional and modern aspects of Ethiopia. He does not give

us a critical analysis of Amharic literature in terms of aesthetic or literary criteria. The questions are, then: What purpose does the book serve? What contributions does it make to the fund of knowledge about Ethiopia?

In terms of these queries, there are at least two answers. First, Molvaer's book can be considered a contribution to the field of Ethiopian studies in that it is the only comprehensive single volume on social relation, belief systems, etiquette, and relations between individuals at the family level that are most characteristic of Christian Ethiopia.¹ Second, (and this is the focus of the review), Molvaer's book can be considered an answer to the question: do Ethiopian creative writers, (or at least a significant number of them), attempt to reflect life as realistically as the *genres* they have chosen, their own abilities, and the censors' scissors permit? Kane asserted that all Ethiopian writers

[lacked] the willingness to confront life as it is lived in Ethiopia and to observe carefully and probe deeply in their search for understanding. (2)

As Molvaer amply demonstrates, however, this conclusion is simply untrue. From its advent as a more or less sustained activity at the beginning of this century, Amharic literature, creative or otherwise, has been reflective, and in some case directly or indirectly critical, of the existing socioeconomic condition.

At any give time, those who have articulated and formulated their concerns in written form are most often members of the "intellectual" elite, among whom are a few representatives from the existing ruling or power elite. What Kane has completely missed and Molvaer grasped is that a writer's perceptions, interpretation, and criticism of "life as it is lived" is to a large extent influenced by his sociocultural milieu and class upbringing. In this sense, therefore, the proposition that all literature (African, European, American, etc.) reflects life is plausible and defensible. For no artist creates *ex nihilo*; both in the choice of subject matter and in the mode of its presentation, the cultures which he has most deeply internalized are determinative. So, even when an artist produces a utopian or idealistic work, it can be argued that the work will reflect "negatively" the constraints and problems that beset the body

politic. In light of these considerations, Kane's remark is seen to be accusatory without being explanatory in a critical sense. Molvaer's study is a sober refutation of such hasty generalizations and a reminder that critics also should "observe carefully and probe deeply in their search for understanding" literary works written in languages and cultural setting different from theirs.

Molvaer provides numerous examples in which social issues are the main topics. He shows that a number of writers use radical language when discussing change but offer no constructive suggestions which can serve as resolutions of socioeconomic and political issues (180-190). From their published works, most writers in Amharic seem to believe that the country only needed modern technical knowledge.² This lack, it is intimated, can be remedied by the spread of European-type education and by adjustments here and there in the administrative establishment. The basic sociocultural structures, however, would remain essentially unaltered.

At the individual level, such an attitude in literature is well represented by Araya, the main character of a novel by the same name. The protagonist goes abroad, studies agricultural science, and returns home as an expert. Yet he has neither changed in his orientation to life nor undergone any traumatic or interesting changes in his value system. He echoes French liberal views, but it is very doubtful that they have become internalized elements of this world view or even that he has a modicum of commitment to them. It is as if his psychological development and the maturation of his sociopolitical consciousness follow a predetermined natural course independent of the quality and variety of his experiences. (See also Molvaer, 169, 181-183; Demmisse Mannahlot, 1967:77; Kane, 141.)

A chronological survey of Amharic literature reveals a trend of increasing concern with social issues and problems. It also shows a growing influence of foreign, especially European, ideas on the power elite and its ideologues as well as on its reformist critics. The traditional "intelligentsia" loses its authority and prestige; and a small, but crucial, European-style educated urban class begins to gradually supersede the traditional elite. Eventually, the new group comes to dominate the modern aspects of the administrative machinery and the field of literary production. Amharic creative writing can thus

be seen as an activity that developed, *inter alia*, as a response to European ideas and models. An indirect confirmation of this is that almost all the Ethiopian writers cited by Molvaer have some type of European education or experience; almost every one of them has mastered or has sufficient knowledge of at least one European language.

The articulation and formulation of social issues and problems in one mode or another is of course not a new phenomenon in Ethiopia. For instance, Bahrey's attempt (1593) at explaining the military prowess of the Oromo and the weakness of the state in a sociopolitical analytic framework, although an extraordinary scientific achievement for its time, is more than an expression of concern. Indeed, for Bahrey, it is an expression of protest against the existing state sociopolitical structure which, in his eyes, has become disastrously dysfunctional.

Protest in Amharic literature goes to the first decade of this century; that is, to the beginning of Amharic literature (creative and informational) as a more or less sustained activity. For example, the following is a portion of an open letter of protest addressed to Emperor Menilek II and his advisers:

When we study international relations [we find governments] making covenants in which the relevant issues are accurately enumerated and defined. In the case of the rubber concession [given to a foreign company by Ethiopia], however, there is no specification of the amount of rubber to be transacted; neither is the price [per unit of weight] fixed. Because of this the foreign contractor has enriched himself; he feels secure because he is protected by the seal of the government. He is wallowing in the wealth produced by the poor and has become the King of rubber. The Ethiopian people appear to him as slaves. (my translation)

The protestor then goes on to urge the rulers to revoke the concession, since it is financially unsound and unacceptable, both politically and socially.

Molvaer does not speak of protest literature as such. Nonetheless, he provides examples where issues are presented in the form of protest (e.g., 27, 173). On the other hand, Molvaer shows that there is no dearth of description of aspects of sociopolitical life in Amharic literature. He seems to imply that such descriptions are at the same time evaluative or judgmen-

tal regardless of the writer's intentions: for they indicate the writer's attitude towards change. More explicitly, however, Molvaer has gone further and attempted to characterize and categorize attitudes toward change as found in the literature and as held by individual authors (172-200).

As people familiar with the Ethiopian political scene know, student publications and underground literature had long demanded the overthrow of the political authority and supporting socioeconomic structures. Although they did not go and could not have gone so far, even "legitimate" publications implicitly condemned the system for its failure to eradicate corruption and ameliorate the condition of the poor. For instance, Seifu Metaferia (1968: 73-75) poetically condemned the existing social system simply by evoking an atmosphere of imbalance in a social system where the comfort of the few coexists with the destitution of the many. Here is my own translation of a portion of Serifu Metaferia's *Kiränt bäbullukko*.

To be on the verandah in a sofa
Cozily wrapped in a *bullukko*³
To listen to the thunder rolling
 in the distance,
To watch the dark pregnant clouds
 melt in torrents of rain;
To perceive, to experience all this
 without anxiety, without disquiet
 to disturb the heart;
This is happiness.
To watch the pebbles dance in rhythm
 to the thick lashes of rain
To see petals falling, to hear the rooftop sing,
Cozily wrapped in a *bullukko*,
No uneasiness to discomfort the mind;
This is happiness.
But wait! I'm not that woman
 whom life a beast of burden has made;
That woman whose wet rags
 outline her cold, emaciated body;
And whose every step is a picture of weariness.

Seifu Metaferia proceeds subtly to contrast the life of comfort and that of toil and poverty. He recreates, without a word of

criticism or overt judgement, an unstable and contradictory situation heading the complacent and the unconcerned toward catastrophe.

Similar themes in which the inherent instability of the system and its imminent disintegration are alluded to are also found in descriptive/analytic writings. For instance, Mesfin Wolde-Mariam (1968), writing in English, warned of the potential catastrophic consequences of the existing imbalance in wealth among individuals and in development between rural and urban areas. Mesfin Wolde-Mariam felt that

The enrichment of an insignificant fraction of the total population beyond any proportion to the general condition can only breed strife and animosity. (14)

He saw, however, a possibility "for peaceful change and continued progress," provided that "the present extreme disparity [is] removed" (14).

Haddis Alemayehu, in *Fikir iskä mäqabir*, on the other hand, envisioned the likelihood of a violent resolution of Ethiopia's social antagonisms. His book is an engrossing novel. More relevant in the present context is its treatment of the dialectical tension between the static form of an archaic social system and the dynamic content of the growing sociopolitical consciousness of the oppressed. The maintenance of the privileges of the ruling class is diametrically opposed to the needs and interests of the peasants. The conflict generated by this state of affairs is violently resolved in favor of the peasants. Their leader, Abäjjä Bäläw, himself of peasant origin, had been able to redress injustice only by resorting to violence. As Molvaer has aptly observed (184), however, Abäjjä Bäläw is not developed enough for a character that plays such a pivotal role in what is, perhaps, the most important sociopolitical event in the whole book. It is as if Alemayehu wanted him to be less an individual and more a representation of the point of convergence of the collective grievances and concerted action of the peasantry.

To conclude, Molvaer's study shows that a large portion of Amharic literature has social concerns as one of its main themes. However, Molvaer does not present his detailed ethnographic descriptions from an integrative perspective. These

descriptions do not issue from nor give rise to a coherent, integrated view of society, but emerge from a loose, fragmentary representation of a society.

Molvaer's book is refreshingly free of pseudo-generalization about the Amharic language (cf. Kane 221) and about the ethnic composition of the Ethiopian people (cf. Gerard, 271-171). The book also demonstrates that Molvaer is one of the very few expatriate scholars who has a grasp of not only the core meanings, but also of the subtle nuances and associations of Amharic words and constructions. Such attainment is necessary for a genuine appreciation and well founded critical evaluation of literature.

NOTES

1. Almost all of these are aerial features and, therefore, are found all over Ethiopia, indeed, all over the Horn. For some details see Levin (1974: 46-88).
2. This observation is true for the period up to 1974, and all the preceding and following comments refer to that period. The literature under the *derge* regime, where censorship was much more stringent than the previous regime, merits a separate study.
3. A *bullukko* is a hand-woven and double-layered thick wide cotton "blanket." It was (and in some areas is still) used as an overcoat in cold seasons and as a comforter-cum-sheet and blanket at night. In the central highlands only relatively well off people could afford it.

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Realism in Haddis Alemayehu

Fikre Tolossa



The year 1966 is extremely significant for Amharic literature, for it was in this year that the first realistic novel *Fikir Isqe Mekabir* (*Love Unto Grave*) was born. Several years after its publication this novel stands out alone, still not exceeded by any other work of its time as an example of literary realism, despite the claim by critic Thomas Leiper Kane, who said, "It must be acknowledged that this work belongs to the Romantic school" (109). In this paper, however, I will show to the contrary Alemayehu's use of realism in the novel, through which he is able to expose some of the most important contradictions of feudal Ethiopia. Without this novel, we wouldn't have had an aesthetic record of the reality of that frightening epoch, and therein lies the merit of Haddis Alemayehu, in addition to his unsurpassed contribution to the further development of Amharic literary realism.

We can see why Kane says *Fikre Isqe Mekaber* belongs in the Romantic School, because the characters all serve symbolic functions. But Alemayehu's characters work as effectively as they do precisely because of the author's commitment to literary realism in their creation. If Fitawrari Meshesha can be seen as a symbol of feudal Ethiopia, then Seble and Bezzabeh are the victims of this system, and Kassa is its antithesis, but from the beginning of the novel all these characters have their own individuality. The author introduces Meshesha at the beginning of the novel in the following manner:

Fitawrari Meshesha is an officer who is proud of his lordship. If he once starts to narrate endlessly like Wudasee Mariam about his relationship with the kings of Tigre and Shoa, it doesn't occur to him that the listener might be bored. According to his narration, he should have been the king of either Shoa or Gondar. He considers it to be the worst of all injustices that the rank which comes after kingship [if not kingship itself] was not conferred upon him. But what can one do about it? This is something which is attained by luck rather than by struggle! "I, Meshesha, I, Master of all the courageous ones, everybody knows that no-one can match me, let alone exceed my nobility or valor. But what can one do about it! The time in which men were chosen by the merit of their breed and shield is long gone: people like me find ourselves amidst farmers and oxen, here in the countryside," says he becoming somewhat angry; and his flatterers say to him, "Never mind, Sir, this time shall pass, we shall not always remain as we are now." And upon hearing this, he is comforted. (Alemayehu 83-84)*

Meshesha, by nature, is arrogant, extremely proud and honor-conscious. When "Fitawrari" Assegahen refuses to marry Seble as a virgin, Meshesha's feudal pride and honor are hurt beyond limit. To those gathered in his house he says,

"Although time has thrown us down, yet, she [Seble] is of noble birth in whose veins flow the blood of numerous kings. Our territory could be taken away from us and bartered with a merchant for cotton or hide; but the bones and blood we

* All translations in this chapter are mine. [F.T.]

inherited from our kingly fathers, strongly attached as they are to our flesh and soul, cannot be bartered together with our territory. How dare he [Fitawrari Assegahen] abuse our honor by refusing to marry our daughter as a virgin." (101)

To avenge his name, he writes a letter to Fitawrari Assegahen, challenging him to a duel even though it is certain that he will lose the duel because of his old age. Commenting on Meshesha's love of fighting, the author says:

He was reputed for respecting a person who, after insulting and beating somebody is willing to give ransom rather than one who accepts ransom, for being insulted and beaten by somebody. Even when he was a governor and a judge, there were rumors that if a person appeared before him to complain that somebody beat him up, he would say, "Don't you have hands yourself?" and if somebody complained about being insulted, "Why, don't you have a mouth yourself?" And his saying so made him appear to favor those who were as strong as himself. They say it was because of this that he was severely criticized and his territory taken away from him. (132)

The duel between him and Assegahen does not take place. Meshesha becomes all the more conceited and reminisces on his past glories:

It wasn't even a year or two ago! It was just yesterday when I went to the battlefield exposing my neck to the dagger and my chest to the and all for your sake and for the sake of my people. Who by Christ sacrifices his life to his people? When everybody was simply weeping here it was only I who sacrificed my life to my people like Christ. Is this the way I should be treated for all I have done? Never mind, I will be given my reward up above!" said Fitawrari pointing at the heaven which would pay him what he deserved, and his wife and his relatives started to reproach themselves and to pamper him. And Fitawrari forgave them after letting himself be pampered for awhile. (175)

Meshesha is indeed a typical Amhara landlord, who is of the opinion that the more a peasant is oppressed the more submissive he will be. For Meshesha there is no life in the present. He

lives in the memory of the “glorious” feudal past. His flatterers, who are actually interested in feeding themselves at his expense by hailing his past deeds, contribute greatly to his living in the past. Although he is now an old man of over seventy, yet refusing to accept the present reality, he considers himself to be as strong as he was about 20 or 25 years ago (256).

Even though he is a symbol of the dying feudalism, he is himself the victim of the system he represents. The reason for his endeavor to find a suitable husband for his daughter Seble emanates from a fatherly love and concern for the future of his daughter. Seble, the unfortunate daughter of Meshesha, however, is a victim of the whole feudal system. Early marriage is supposed to be a source of happiness and a sign of being charming in the society she lives in, but because her father is too arrogant and proud to accept a number of attractive suitors for Seble, she remains without a husband. This makes her the talk of the women in the neighborhood. Besides being watched too closely by her parents so that she cannot meet any young men, there is a guard around her who keeps watch over her wherever she happens to be. This tragic situation makes her feel that she is a prisoner. As a matter of fact, Seble envies her slaves, who are freer than herself in this regard. On one occasion she watches her slaves from afar making love in a field and she speaks:

“You are like butterflies and bees! There is nobody to rebuke you and punish you for letting her honor be damaged.” She then becomes sad because the freedom of servants reminds her of her honorable slavery. (98)

The best part of Seble’s memory is her childhood. Until she was five or six years old she had been free enough to play with the children of the neighborhood. However, one day it so happened that she fought with a poor child and the child beat her. Seeing this, Seble’s father became furious and prevented her from playing with the children of the poor from then on. Hence, she was not able to release her emotions by singing and dancing with her playmates at different festivals and weddings. It is this which makes Seble utterly bitter. She expresses her repressed emotions:

“Ah, being of noble birth! If being of noble birth is being imprisoned like me and not being able to do what one wishes to do, then being of noble birth is a punishment worse than all kinds of punishments, and it is slavery worse than all forms of slavery.” (244)

When her father finds out that Seble is in love with her teacher Bezzabeh, who is the son of a peasant, he becomes insane and chains her hands and feet. Suspecting that Bezzabeh has put a spell on her, he hires a treacherous monk to break the spell and find her a husband. But Seble wants to marry Bezzabeh, although she very well knows the consequences of marrying him. And so she runs away from home, disguised as a monk herself, in search of Bezzabeh, and leaving aside the husband chosen for her by her father. Unfortunately, Bezzabeh dies and Seble becomes a nun and tends his grave till she dies years later.

Bezzabeh, too, is a victim of a decadent system. Because of his numerous childhood illnesses, his mother, hoping to save his life, consecrates him to different *tabots*, including a vow of chastity. When Bezzabeh comes of age, he realizes the difficult position he is in and abandons his aging parents and runs away from home. When they eventually die, their deaths remain on his conscience and torture him.

The democratic ideas of Haddis Alemayehu find expression in the image of Gudu Kassa, who is a man well-versed with traditional church-education but who is also a free-thinker, looking at everything around him critically. “*Gudu*” means “weird;” he is called “Gudu Kassa” by all except Seble and Bezzabeh as all find him to be strange and his ideas radical. Gudu Kassa is always outspoken against the ill practices of the Orthodox Church. On top of that, he is the arch enemy of the feudal system. Speaking of the feudal system, he says:

“The structure of our society, its order, customs, traditions and laws were not made like a living social system. They were rather made like a lifeless stone wall whose pieces lie upon each other, the ones on top weighing heavily on the ones underneath. And if this continues for a long time, the ones underneath will surely slip out and the whole structure will crumble unless and until a living and humane social order is formed.” (122)

Being Seble's uncle, Kassa defends her against her parents. He holds her parents responsible for the suffering that she undergoes. In fact, he insults and criticizes his sister Teruaynet and her husband Meshesha openly, although they don't take his words seriously (119). When Meshesha chains Seble, Gudu Kassa warns him that if anything bad ever happens to Seble, he will avenge her. When he later hears of the death of both Meshesha and Teruaynet, he coldly says that it is their contempt and vanity that killed them. Kassa has been Seble's "enlightener." It is he who opens her eyes and makes her see the horror around her. She herself admits this when she says:

"Yes, long live Kassa! He has opened our eyes to the extent we can see how cruel and how unjust our social order is. He has made us conscious enough to see all this and to get angry and to weep helplessly. Since we cannot get out of our situation, we would have lived happily had not our eyes been opened and had we not been able to see." (313)

When Meshesha looks for Bezzabeh, to whip him for "making" his daughter fall in love with him, Gudu Kassa shelters Bezzabeh in his house and goes to the extent of arranging his elopement with Seble.

To the shock and surprise of his "high-born" relatives and all his neighbors, this "queer" man has married his slave, giving her a status equal to his. He has tried to reform his church by criticizing the ill practices of the priests; and seeing that the priests will not stop their corruption, he has excommunicated himself from the Orthodox Church. In the end, the society, which he abhors and rejects, casts him out.

Kassa's influence on Seble becomes even more obvious when she fearlessly faces her father after he informs her of his intention to marry her off to a rich nobleman. Since she is in love with the son of a peasant, whom her father does not consider to be a human being, she says boldly:

"A peasant too is a human being! And the son of a peasant is also a human being! I do not think that the lineage of a nobleman is any purer than that of a peasant, and as such, I do not prefer a nobleman to a peasant. That is not my problem! I love this man whom you call the son of a peasant! There is no reason why he should be insulted just because I love him!

If you ... If ... y-o-u wa-nt ... you may insult me!" (410)

When her father once again mentions his intention of arranging her marriage to a nobleman, she exclaims: "Let it be clear to you from now on that I won't let myself be sold to somebody that I don't like. Not when I am alive. You may sell my corpse, but it won't cost anything" (411). When Gudu Kassa sides with Seble, her mother Woyzero Teruaynet and father Meshesha warn him never to set foot in their house again.

Kabtish Yimer, Seble's slave-maiden, is portrayed as happier and freer than Seble. She does what she feels like doing; she sings, speaks whatever is on her mind to Seble, and enjoys music and sex. Sometimes, however, she speaks a bitter truth about her life as a slave girl:

"The joy of a slave couple is only during love-making, not after giving birth to a child! A slave couple cannot count on their children when they are tired, sick or old! The motherhood of a slave woman is till she gets pregnant, till she gives birth to her child, till she nurses him with her milk and till the child is able to eat food. After that, she is no more the mother of her child. After that, both mother and child are the property of their owner!" (311)

The author's criticism of the Orthodox Church is embodied in the images of Mogessé, Fitawrari Meshesha's confessor, and in Aba Tekle-Haymanot, the treacherous monk. Mogessé doesn't have his own views; and even when he has one, he doesn't have the courage to speak it out, especially if his view is opposed to that of Meshesha. Mogessé is not actually interested in Meshesha himself as much as in food. In order to fill his belly at the expense of Meshesha, he praises him and withholds his own views if he thinks that they would offend Meshesha.

Aba Tekle-Haymanot is even worse than Mogessé. The problem with him is that he is a eunuch. It seems that he has turned into a monk as a result of this defect, and because he can earn his bread easily by wearing the mask of a monk. When Meshesha hires him to break the spell which is supposedly cast by Bezzabeh, Tekle-Haymanot convinces Meshesha that he possesses a cross which God had thrown down from heaven after Tekle-Haymanot had spent a long time fasting and praying. Later, however, we come to learn that the eunuch is noth-

ing but a cheat and an alcoholic.

It is no exaggeration to say that Haddis Alemayehu is a master of realism and characterization. Each of his heroes is an individual with his or her own unique qualities. The author also provides many realistic details and profound observations on life in the plot of *Feker Isqe Mekaber*. To cite just one instance, Bogale Mebratu one day returns to his house, having tilled his land the whole day. When he asks his wife to give him some food, she tells him that she has not prepared food because she has been taking care of their child. But instead of ending the matter there, she unnecessarily regrets the fact that she has been married to Bogale Mebratu and blames her confessor for advising her to enter into hell — that is to say, into the house of her husband.

Bogale Mebratu is saddened and embittered by his wife's words. He goes to the back yard of his house, sits there and regrets taking a wife, fathering a child, making a home; in a word, he regrets being a family man instead of enjoying the free life of a bachelor. At this point, when the reader thinks that Bogale Mebratu will divorce his wife, the author springs his surprise:

At this point, a certain voice, a certain childish voice which touches the heart like the sound of a violin heard at night from afar, said, "Pa-p-aa-aa!" Then the sea became calm. The storm which had been exhausting Ato Bogale now floating and now sinking him, became still suddenly as if it was commanded by that angelic voice. "Pa-a-paaa co-m-e he-r-e!" said the voice once more. "Don't weep my prince, don't weep, papa will come now, papa will come to us!" said another voice, a feminine voice. The first was the voice of his child, the second, that of his wife. (22-23)

Upon hearing the voices of his child and his wife, Bogale Mebratu's heart is deeply moved and he forgives his wife. He is happy once again in being a family man. He returns to his house and kisses his wife after a while, affectionately. The couple indeed loves each other in spite of their occasional conflicts. Commenting on the occasional conflicts of a husband and wife who love one another, the author makes a profound remark:

It is quite obvious that a conflict which flares up between a

husband and wife who love one another revives and renews their love, whereas a conflict which arises between a husband and a wife who hate each other brings forth one revenge upon another, resulting in the gradual separation of the two. (29)

We also see the use of literary realism in other places throughout the book, beyond the author's acute characterizations. When Haddis Alemayehu's literary predecessors, such as Heruy Wolde-Selassie, Girmachew Tekle-Hawariat, Assefa Gebre-Mariam, Be'emnet Gebre-Amlak, and Berhanu Zerihun tell us that their heroes and heroines are in love, we are skeptical. Haddis Alemayehu does not tell us that his hero and heroine are in love. He shows us that they are indeed in love. The heroes of Haddis Alemayehu's predecessors fall in love at first sight. But the love of Haddis Alemayehu's hero and heroine develops gradually and we can see clearly how and why this happens.

Further examples of literary realism include the scene in the *Gibi*, or palace, where the Emperor holds a party for his subjects. This scene not only criticizes the monarchy directly, but shows vividly the humiliation and the dehumanization of some of the subjects of the Emperor who seemingly are being honored by being "invited" to the Emperor's party. When it is the common subjects' turn to enter the party hall, the court attendants usher them in by hitting them with sticks indiscriminantly under the pretext of keeping order, as if they were a herd of donkeys (444).

The last days of Bogale Mebratu and Woudenesh Betamu are also realistic in their tragic depiction. A short while before he dies, Bogale Mebratu begs his wife to bring him some beer he wishes to taste for the last time. Since she herself is weak and blind and does not have any beer at home, she calls out for her neighbors and pleads with them to bring her husband some beer. But the neighbors, fearing that they will catch the disease which they wrongly think is contagious, will not open their doors to the wife of the dying man. Moreover, none of the neighbors who have lived with the couple for ages will bury the body of Bogale Mebratu when he tragically dies. Later, however, a certain slaveowner orders his slave to go and help Woudenesh Betamu bury her husband. Here, the bitter side of life is realistically presented by Alemayehu: the slaveowner,

who is himself afraid of dying, sends his slave to be killed! (57)

The realistic details continue with the description of the *Kene* school, where Bezzabeh spends a great deal of time at Aleka Kenfu's, the devoted scholar who is probably a historical figure who actually existed in Dimma; and with the appearance of the clergy carrying the Ark of the Covenant in the hope of stopping the duel between Meshesha and Assegahen. The author uses other sophisticated literary devices often associated with literary realism to handle some aspects of his story. For instance, before going deep into the cause of the duel between Meshesha and Assegahen, the author introduces the story indirectly through the women who criticize Seble in the Church (87-88). Then, in a separate chapter, he applies the flashback method instead of narrating this incident in the traditional manner. The author also does not inform us directly how Bezzabeh is beaten and robbed in the desert of Abbay. We come to learn of this event through Seble, who, disguised as a monk near Bezzabeh's deathbed, imagines all that has happened to her lover (538-541).

Of course the author isn't entirely committed to literary realism in the novel. The very ideas of Seble's disguise as a monk and her daring journey in the wood itself are fantastic. When we read the chapter on the dangerous journey of a monk who is suddenly introduced to us, we wonder who this monk is and where he is from. Since the identity of the monk is hidden from us, we are extremely intrigued and await with impatience to find out his identity. The moment we find out that the monk is actually Seble, we are dumbfounded.

Nonetheless, the plot of this novel develops logically and harmoniously like any plot of a realistic work of literature. When we are faced with the appearance of the two men in the woods with a rope to bring down beehives from the tops of trees, for example, we find it plausible because when Seble is in trouble and is unable to get down from the top of a tall tree it is these two men who appear with a rope and help her down (499-502). If the author had told us that the two men happened to be in the wood by chance and that they happened to be carrying a long rope, we wouldn't have believed him. Or had he informed us that they had been sent there by a supernatural force or to rescue Seble, we wouldn't have been convinced. But when the narrator tells us that they are there with a long rope

to bring down beehives from tree-tops, we find it credible.

At one very important point, though, the author breaks the natural development of the plot unconvincingly. As Bezzabeh is hiding at Gudu Kassa's place, Gudu Kassa advises him to go to Addis Abeba and start a new career, swearing that he will bring Seble to Bezzabeh as soon as he can (99-100). When Gudu Kassa gives his word to Bezzabeh, we take it seriously because we believe in his personal integrity. But months pass without his taking Seble to Addis Abeba and the day of her marriage to another person approaches. The author never tells us why Gudu Kassa does not take Seble to Bezzabeh as he has promised. True, we have been informed that Gudu Kassa has been forbidden to see Seble. Nevertheless, when Bezzabeh sends a letter to Seble, it is Gudu Kassa himself who hands it over to her in person, a few days before her wedding day. But the question is why doesn't he take Seble away with him if he is in a position to meet her and hand her over Bezzabeh's letters? Why cannot Seble beg him to help her run away since he is the only person in whom she can confide? Why should she run alone in the wilderness disguised as a monk? Would this not be absurd and tantamount to committing suicide? The narrator/author is not interested in answering these questions. In fact, he deliberately evades them. Nonetheless, we know why Haddis Alemayehu forces Seble to run into the wilderness, all alone. He does this because he does not want the story to end happily, even though the latter would seem to be its natural and logical conclusion.

The motivation itself behind Bezzabeh's running towards Gojjam, abandoning his post as a *Kene* teacher in Addis Abeba upon hearing of Seble's marriage, is ambiguous. Why does he have to run to Gojjam? To see her for the last time? Surely, he cannot do this, since it would be his end if he were to be seen around Meshesha's house. Is he trying to elope with Seble once again? Well, this would be too absurd. I believe that the author wants him to go to Gojjam simply because he wants to get him beaten by some robbers and let him meet Seble, for the last time, on his deathbed. This situation also is too contrived. In this one instance, Haddis Alemayehu ceases to be a realist, for a realist would not interfere with the freedom of his hero.

The death of "Fitawrari" Meshesha and his wife in the

novel can be justified. Nevertheless, it is unjust on the part of the author to have killed Bezzabeh, and most of all Gudu Kassa, the promoter of the author's progressive and democratic ideals. It is sad that the author does not realize that in killing Gudu Kassa unjustly he is also symbolically killing the hope of the dissemination of the democratic ideals which Kassa stands for. The novel ends with the death of all the main characters. Haddis Alemayehu is traditional in the finale of his novel because he felt he must kill all his principal protagonists (Meshesha, Teruaynet, Bezzabeh, Seble, and even Gudu Kassa) in order to conclude the book.

In conclusion, in *Feker Isqe Mekaber* the whole evil of the feudal system is embodied in the person of Meshesha, but Haddis Alemayehu goes further than that and realistically reflects the peasant revolt against the injustice of feudalism by choosing Meshesha's tenants as the representatives of this revolt. The voluntary leader of the peasants, Abedje Belew, is the Robin Hood of the region and the spokesman of the peasants. His victory over the landlord Meshesha, besides showing the truth that the author has progressive ideals, foretells the ultimate victory over the aristocracy.

Through the criticism of Gudu Kassa and the portrayal of the fake monk, Aba Tekle-Haymanot, Alemayehu criticizes the ill-practices of the clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. However, he also exposes the hypocrisy of the congregation who go to church not to pray, as it would be natural to assume, but rather to find occasion for backbiting, gossiping, and picking suitable partners. How much more realistic can the author get than this? And all these are delineated to the reader in a language full of life and vigor. Herein lies the unsurpassed depiction of realism in Haddis Alemayehu's *Feker Isqe Mekaber*.

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Literature and Politics in Ethiopia: A Case Study of Abe Gubanya's *Alwelledim*

Ghirmai Negash



A. THEORETICAL TOOLS

In her book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, M. Bal has posited a theoretical model for a systematic study of narrative texts. This model, which is based on a three-layer distinction of independent but “in effect inseparable” notions, rests on the belief that it is possible, as well as desirable, “to formulate a textual description in such a way that it is accessible to others;” it does not regard itself as the “only correct” descriptive theory possible (Bal 4). The three layers, or, three “notions,” as Bal alternately calls them, which constitute this model are: text, story, and fabula.

A narrative text is defined as “a text in which a narrative agent tells a story” (119). Or, to put it in somewhat simpler terms, it is the level in which the usage of language, as uttered by the different speakers involved, can be identified.

The fabula is defined as “a series of logically and chrono-

logically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (5). While "event" is understood as the "transition from one state to another," actors are defined as "agents that perform actions" (5). In actual practice, analysis of a fabula leads or should lead to revealing elements like plot, actors, time sequence, and location.

"A story is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner" (5). And any specific story can be described by its distinctly unique features called aspects. They are Order, Rhythm, Frequency, Character, Space, and Focalization. Of these features, the last one, Focalization, is the aspect most responsible for "the shaping of the meaning" of a story (51).

B. APPLICABILITY AND CONSTRAINTS OF THE THEORY

The advantages that this theoretical model gives in studying texts are, basically, that 1) it provides a systematic description of narrative texts; that 2) a description made on the basis of this theory is explicit and has, therefore, accountability; and 3) because the theory is a systematic one, "it is in principle possible to give a complete description of a text, that is an account of all the narrative characteristics of the text in question" (9). However, as Bal has indeed pointed out, there is a danger that, for example, if one is not careful enough to identify what is relevant, one entangles oneself with "a description that would consume a great amount of time and paper, and, would, in the end, be rather uninteresting" (9).

With respect to my application of said theoretical model to Abe Gubanya's novel *Alwelledim*, therefore, it is necessary to bear in mind that I am not aiming at an exhaustive and complete description of all narrative characteristics of the text in question. Rather, I will focus on the story level, and focalization, as the most significant feature of the story, will form the core of my analysis. And whenever focalization comes up, the following three crucial questions formulated by Bal will serve as my point of departure:

1. What does the character focalize?
2. How does it do this?
3. Who focalizes it? Or whose focalized object is it? (106)

Likewise (since it would be technically unattainable or, if it were, utterly boring), I will not give a definition or an explanation of a concept derived from Bal's theory every time that I

use one in my description. Whenever it occurs to me absolutely necessary, I will refer to them with notations (for example, with /CF/ to indicate that the focalizer is character-bound). I presume, of course, that anyone interested in knowing more about Bal's theory in relation to my application will refer to her work, *Narratology*, itself.

C. EVALUATION

The story of *Alwelledim* is a tale, told in the first person, of a hero who starts telling his story before he is born and keeps on telling it long after he is dead. The first lines of the opening paragraph show the narrator's sense of urgency to set the record straight:

From the time I came to this world until I left it, not a single crime have I committed. Yet people regarded me as if I had committed an unprecedented crime ... If my coming to the world was sin, I am not to blame for it; it is the force that created me, with the desire to be free, who should be held responsible. (Gubenya 35)¹

With these words, he tries to register his innocence. As such, these retrospective thoughts absolve him of any guilt, as he had attempted to 'abort' his birth by refusing to be born. The following dialogue takes place between him (still in the womb) and his mother:

"Goodness me! I think it is going to happen here. All the same, where could I go?" she said, believing that I was coming out easily.

"Never, I don't want to be born," said I, shouting.

"I think I have to take a proper place," she said, leaning toward the street-end of the *ka'ab* fence.

"Never, I don't want to be born," I said, harder again.

"Strange! Could it be the devil that is calling me?" she said.

"No way! What devil? It is me. I do not want to be born," I said.

"Who are you?" she asked, overwhelmed with fear.

"I am the baby that is in your belly," I replied to her. (41-42)

Just like any mother that would be confronted with the same situation, the mother of this "strange pregnancy" does not know

what to do with this "talking unborn baby."

The unborn's difficult questions provoke the conscience of the mother. Consequently, it is only when she begins to ask the right questions that she understands what is at stake. And by the time that she has reached that stage, for the first time in her life, she cannot but feel pathetic and ashamed of herself. Since the scene is of importance to the development of the story, it is worth quoting at length the dialogue in which her transformation takes place:

"Why don't you come out then?" she said.

"I do not want to be born, to suffer."

"I will do all I can to raise you."

"What do you have to sustain me?"

"Be it by begging, I will raise you."

"I would rather die. Who do you think I am?"

"Do you think I will be born relying on your beggary? How can you live, in your own country, with your hope on begging, instead of earning your life with doing what you are able to? As if your own shattered life has not been sad enough how do you dare to give birth to a child for which you have no means to raise?"

"... Why didn't you try to work [i.e. instead of begging]?"

"I used to work as a house servant. The doctor said I had consumption, and they threw me out so that I may not contaminate my master's family."

"Alright, do you have a piece of land?"

"No, I don't."

"Do you have a house?"

"No."

"Do you have education?"

"No."

"What else do you have?"

"Nothing."

"Are you telling me then to be born in order to inherit your legacy of poverty, disease, and ignorance?"

"How do you know what the future holds for you, son?" she retorted sadly. (43-44)

From this momentous event in the mother's life onward, the conversation between the mother and the baby, still unborn, shifts: the baby's voice of protest against being born adopts a

realistic tone and becomes a voice of protest against the existing order of things in society. As he moves from one place to another he sees that the country in which he finds himself (an island called Israelos) has a socioeconomic and administrative system that is rotten and corrupt. At the same time, he also realizes that the system, despite its corruptness, remains intact not only because its leaders know how to reduce the poor and the oppressed (like the mother) to just “echoes” of what they told them through the radio and the press, but also because of the passivity, and even complacency of those citizens who got the opportunity to go on to higher education at the cost of the masses.

One of these learned people is an obstetrician. The doctor and the baby meet in an operating room of “a hospital for the poor” (the baby is still unborn), as the doctor, following an x-ray diagnosis, prepares to perform a caesarian section. When the doctor approaches the mother to deliver the baby, the baby bursts out in anger. For, as he puts it, in the first place the doctor is collaborating with the police to force him out of “[his] mother’s womb, the cave of [his] rebellion, or as [he] see[s] it the bastion of [his] independence.” In an attempt to prick the conscience of the doctor, the protagonist faces him with the same allegations that he railed against his mother:

By the way, have you food, shelter and clothing for me prepared when you force me out from my hiding place? Or are you throwing me out into the open, like it happened to my mother? (55)

But if the confrontation of the child with the doctor is “frightening,” as the latter experiences it, the statements that the child makes about the press, the Coptic church, the missions, and the Court may qualify as “doubly frightening.” As he sarcastically puts it to a group of journalists who come to the hospital to verify what they have heard about him, “Why should you need evidence while you can do with, as usual?” (69) Sensational stories, and the glorification of names of “people of so-called high birth,” is what the press has become all about (79-80).

The Protestant mission (this is the church which raises him, as his mother must first be treated for consumption before

he can drink her milk) is as sectarian and bankrupt as the Coptic church. Both, instead of working for the common good of mankind (their proclaimed aim) are interested only in winning souls for their "clubs." They undermine other faiths, and even worse, there are leaders in these "religious clubs" who blackmail and frighten upright and truth-seeking people by calling them "Satan" (67). (This is, for example, what the Coptic priest calls the baby when it rejects baptism, denouncing all labels: Coptic, Islam, Judaism, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhism, etc. (66))

As time passes, however, the young man, now a high school graduate and 20 years old, realizes that his defiant acts such as going on "hunger strike," which he does in the hospital in order to draw attention; organizing a workers' strike for better wages in a contractor/construction company where he is employed as a clerk; or his criticism of the institutions of the existing political system through the media, as we saw above, were bringing him more and more under the attention of the authorities who, long ago, had identified him as their "political nemesis" (103). Laid off from his work, because of his active participation in the workers' strike, he is aware too that he was not employable anymore. As a result, he, together with about ten of his friends, decides to leave the city and go to the countryside. Their aim in the countryside is to cultivate the land and to live there peacefully, away from the "cruelties of employers and of city life" (103). With money borrowed from a development bank, hard work, and a strong willpower that originates in the "instinct feeling for justice, love, and brotherhood," they achieve their goal with relative ease. In about 15 years time, they have a farming community of 10,000 people who have everything in abundance and who, allowing human weakness, were emancipated from vices like "greed, calumny, hate and ignorance" (119). The children in the commune were also different from the rest of the children in the country. They received lessons in practically every field; each child was taught philosophy, natural science, medical and agricultural skills, etc., depending on his/her inclination and ability.

After 15 years of peaceful and meaningful existence on the farm, however, a feeling of unrest comes into the community as the feudal lord, Musie Garabedos, claims the land where they have established their farm and falsely accuses them of

taking “the land that belonged to his father” (120). But meanwhile, something important has taken place too: there is a *coup d’etat* (“a sudden change of government”) in the island of Israelos and the news is on the air. The statement that is broadcast by the new regime reads in part as follows (for reasons that will be clear later, it is necessary to take particular note of this quote):

The enemies of freedom and the people have been eliminated. The new Republic that is formed under the leadership of Marshall Japheros is hunting down the enemies of the people, and punishing them.

Oh! People of Israelos! Today your right, interest and freedom has been regained from the hands of oppressors, tyrants and plunderers. Rejoice! if you encounter the enemies who try to bring back the brutal system of oppression of the past, eliminate them. For them justice is not required; the blood [of innocent victims] that they have shed, without trial, has judged upon them. You execute that judgement. The tribunal of the new Republic has punished many enemies of the people with death....[A list of the executed follows]... No. 10. Musie Garabedos.

The present government, formed by the armed forces, is headed by our respected and beloved liberator of the people, Marshall Japheros. However, this government is [only] provisional, that is, it will stay until all enemies have completely vanished. And then power will be handed over to able civilian leaders, and our country will be governed by truly democratic principles. (139-143)

Despite its promises for the establishment of a democratic state and despite the initial support it gained from the masses, however, the new military government turns increasingly dictatorial and repressive, so much so that names of streets and public places are renamed after military officers: Nuovano Hotel, for instance, becomes Marshall Japheros Hotel (155). And visiting a monument to a “*qene*” writer because there are words of hope engraved on it is considered a forbidden act of crime (156-159).

But, of course, there is a limit to everything; the people of Israelos grow tired of Marshall Japhero’s excessive abuse of a planned and clinically executed *coup d’etat*. There is a change of government, for the second time, in the country. The new

government promises to bring peace, justice, and prosperity. But to the dismay of many, this government, too, is with and for the people only until it has consolidated power for itself. Except for one or two sham reforms and nicely wrapped promises, the new regime proves no better than its predecessor. Nothing comes true of the dreams of "a parliamentary rule" (175-176); the lot of the poor does not change; the abuse of human rights continues unabated:

But after a short time an injustice which shocked everybody happened to me. That which befell some truth and freedom loving people befell me. And now again, because those people who came to power by the price that so many of us paid, wanted, in their turn, to stay in power, someone who knew well that I would not hush my voice when there is lack of justice accused me of a crime. Suddenly they had me arrested by the police. After I stayed in prison I was taken to court for trial. (186)

It may hardly be mentioned, of course, that the accusations with which the hero is charged, irreligious and irreverent traditions, are extremely grave. It goes without saying that anyone in such a predicament would without a doubt be found guilty of high treason. Yet, the hero's reply to the charge is unambiguous and firm:

I do not see the world through the same eyes as you do. As you see it the world is small: you believe that half the world must suffer so that the other half can be happy; you cannot imagine people enjoying life without the other half suffering. For you half of the world must be a slave, so that the other half can be a master. And choose to keep your brothers ignorant and enslaved. (191-199)

Needless to say, his stubbornness and principled stand incur the wrath of the accusers, whose verdict is unanimous, death by firing squad. Our protagonist, however, remains defiant to the end:

Two prison guards who were ordered for my execution pointed their guns, one at my forehead and one at my chest, and said to me, "close your eyes." "My eyes which have not

been closed seeing your crooked masters for the full fifty four years will not be afraid to see for one second my friend, death," I replied. I heard the roaring sound of bullets. Therefore, what I know about the world is up to that point. What happened after that I know nothing about. My life went out with the firing of bullets. (235-236)

D. *ALWELLEDIM* AND THE FEUDO-BOURGEOISE REGIME OF HAILE-SELLASSIE

The Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 is undoubtedly the most drastic political event that happened in the country since the Second World War.² It is drastic both because of its declared Marxist-Leninist State under the leadership of the military, and because of the subsequent, rapid developments that have taken place in the political map of the country as a whole since then. But if the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution was drastic in terms of what it brought about in the country, Gubunya's *Alwelledim* can certainly be seen as the novel that, as it were, announced the coming of that revolution more than a decade before it occurred.

In what follows I will point out those aspects of the 1974 Revolution that were predicted in this novel. Since that revolution was a product of the socioeconomic and political contradictions that were inherent in the feudo-bourgeois system of Emperor Haile-Selassie's Ethiopia, which Gubunya seems to effectively portray in his book, let us consider the parallels between that historical regime and the author's fictional description of it. Commenting on the foundations of the "bourgeois-feudal" system of Emperor Haile-Selassie (1930-1974), Bereket Habte-Selassie remarks:

As agriculture was increasingly commercialized and salaried administrative, security, and judicial personnel operating under a centralized administrative machine were introduced, the power of the feudal lords gradually weakened. The centralization process was begun by Menelik, but was more systematically pursued by Haile Selassie after 1930, and was hastened by the Italians during their occupation from 1936 to 1941.... The new apparatus, however, was cumbersome and expensive, and did not spare the poor peasantry the burden of heavy taxation. Nor did it curtail the significant num-

ber of absentee landlords who claimed exorbitant dues from their tenants. Moreover, it encouraged members of the new bourgeoisie to become absentee landlords by granting them land, and drew important members of the feudal class into the world of commerce and agribusiness, either in joint ventures with the new bourgeoisie or with Western businessmen. The emperor was himself a shrewd businessman and owned a number of large estates. (19)

As the economic and financial interest of the West increased, special laws making the country "safe for investment" were passed in the beginning of the 1960s. And as a result, a powerful group of "commercial and bureaucratic bourgeoisie emerged under the patronage of the emperor and his ministers." (Habte-Selassie 20)

Indeed, as can be inferred from the passage quoted above, there were three distinct social classes in Ethiopia then: the feudal class that formed and preserved the monarchy and the throne; the bourgeoisie which, representing the market and the bureaucracy, formed a political pact with the feudal class; and, of course, the peasantry to which the majority of the oppressed masses belonged. Apart from these three major classes, there were other (sub)groups in the social hierarchy. Among the distinctly visible ones were the workers, the intelligentsia, the lower ranks of the military, and other impoverished sections (including beggars and the lumpen proletariat). And, according to John Markakis, it was precisely a political alliance between diverse groups and classes that led to Haile-Selassie's downfall. Markakis writes:

The opponents of the ancient regime had highlighted some of the major problems facing Ethiopia, especially the legacy of feudalism in the south and the urgent need for land reform. Though the precise form of it was not defined, land reform was the vogue among the intelligentsia, the workers and the lower ranks of the military: all social groups without vested interest in rural landed property which, moreover, recognised the conjunction of class and ethnic divisions in the south as a major obstacle to unity. The social and economic backwardness of the entire country and the lagging pace of development were other major problems for which the ancient regime was held responsible. (239)

Obviously, the parallels that can be drawn between the semi-feudal, semi-capitalist, state of Emperor Haile-Selassie, and the fictional "state of the Island of Israelos" that is described in *Alwelledim*, are many. To begin with, the government of Israelos that is so severely criticized by the unborn baby as the novel opens is very much like the real one running the country at that time. It is described as a regime of people of "high birth," a phrase that, in the then Ethiopian context, referred to the royalty. Also, the social classes that constitute the "Israelos society," as represented in the novel by an individual character or a type from an institution, could very well be the social forces that existed in reality in the Ethiopian society of the 1960s. The "poor mother" of the hero is a typical example of the suffering many; the obstetrician stands for the few educated but frustrated intellectuals of the country; Musie Garabedos, the feudal landlord who tries to confiscate the commoner's land, is representative of the conduct of those people in power during the emperor's reign, and so on.

However, the resemblances between the regime of Haile Selassie and the fictional world of *Alwelledim* does not end here. Like the multinational, autocratic state of Haile-Selassie's Ethiopia, the island nation of Israelos is composed of different ethnic groups. The relation between these groups, as one can collect from various indications in the novel, is far from ideal. Similarly, as in *Alwelledim*, religion in Ethiopia was manipulated for the consolidation of political power.

The state's "divide and rule" tactics created a climate conducive to inter- and intra-religious skirmishes. Moreover, the press in the island of Israelos, as the hero tells us, can boast of anything but objective reporting. Because of the absence of general civil liberties and the laws that protect its freedom, the press has been reduced to mere "sensationalism," and whenever it is serious it cannot help but become a mouthpiece of government propaganda.³ In a 1978 article, Alem Mezgebe made a similar assessment of the situation of the press under Haile-Selassie's administration. Alem Mezgebe, one of Ethiopia's best-known journalists with long experience in the profession, remembers:

Before going on to discuss censorship as I experienced it, I

should like to tell briefly the story of my friend, the novelist and poet Negede Gebre-Aab. This exemplifies, I think, the fate of the independently-minded artist in Ethiopia, whether under the old or the new regime.

In early 1958 Negede Gebre-Aab wrote a novel, *May God Give You a Counselling Mother*, which upheld the value of integrity in the face of corrupting influences. He omitted to present a leather-bound copy to the Emperor, as was customary. That and a satirical poem Negede wrote about the monarch's speech on his return from a visit to the Soviet Union, published in the unionist weekly *The Voice of Eritrea*, were responsible for his fate.

The writer was called to the imperial palace, where he was praised and awarded 1,600 Ethiopian dollars, equivalent to about £229 at that time.

He quickly squandered the money, saying, 'Eat, drink and enjoy yourselves, my friends. I didn't earn this money. It is a bribe I got from the Emperor to shut my mouth.'

Then Negede Gebre-Aab dropped out of sight. He only reappeared in June 1974, when the Armed Forces Committee (the Dergue), demanded the release of political prisoners and the return of the exiles. Negede had been imprisoned and tortured for a period of sixteen years. (Mezgebe 16)

In this article, Mezgebe further pointed out that criticizing the emperor's political regime was made difficult both through formal laws in the constitution and informal (unwritten) codes of practice that were well known to anyone working for the media.

Under Haile-Selassie, the constitution stated in no uncertain terms that the ruler was above criticism: 'By virtue of His Imperial Blood, as well as by the anointing which He received, the person of the Emperor is sacred, His dignity inviolable and His powers indisputable ... Anyone so bold as to speak to injure the Emperor will be punished' (Article 4, 1955 Constitution). A provision like this leaves the critic no room for maneuver, as there is no line of demarcation between the Emperor's person and his power.... When I first joined the Press and Information Department of the Imperial Government (later Ministry of Information) as a translator in March 1957, I was given verbal instructions that certain subjects were 'best left untouched'. (16-17)

These include topics as “strikes,” “Cold War polemics,” “colonialism,” “parliamentary elections involving more than one political party,” “tribal clashes,” “coup d’etat,” and “revolutions.”

E. *ALWELLEDIM* AND THE DERGUE (1974-1991)

It was posited in the introduction to this essay that *Alwelledim*, or rather its hero, can best be seen as a “prophet,” who foresaw the coming and who predicted the nature of the 1974 Revolution. And, indeed, the analogies that can be made between the Dergue, the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) of Ethiopia, and the military government that replaces the old regime in the fictional island of Israelos are so striking that they invite close scrutiny and examination. In fact, with the benefit of hindsight, it is no exaggeration to claim that the 1974 revolution is, in some curious way, a realization of the vision of what the author saw happening in *Alwelledim*, in 1963. The central points of comparison are given below, with some brief commentary when necessary.

Characterizing the beginning of the Ethiopian Revolution from the point of view of class composition of its leadership and their aims as well as their relation with the civilian masses, Markakis writes:

The rebels made no ideological claims at the outset, and the Dergue contented itself initially with the bland nationalist slogan ‘Ethiopia Tikdem’ (Ethiopia First), which became its motto. Its members shared a mutinous disposition and the desire to hobble the ruling clique of aristocrats and imperial retainers, but had no clear idea of how to replace them. The man they chose to head the PMAC, after the deposition, was Aman Andom, a retired general of wholesome reputation and conventional political views.... On 20 December 1974, the PMAC issued a Ten Point Program proclaiming a ‘specifically Ethiopian socialism’, which was defined as self-reliance, equality, the dignity of labour, supremacy of the common good, and the indivisibility of Ethiopian unity. This was hardly Marxism-Leninism, but it was a start. More important, it was in line with the radical mood of the social groups mobilised by the revolution.... Despite its radical posture, the new regime [broke] with the civilian radicals and had its

first internal crisis before it was two months old. (237-238)

Observe the similarity between the above-quoted passage, which describes a real situation, and what the hero of Gubunya's *Alwelledim* writes about the initial days of the imaginary revolution headed by Marshall Japheros:

[At first] when the new military government first came out with their program people everywhere were rejoicing in hope. As I saw it when I came to the city now and then people had accepted the new government without any opposition. The dwellers of the countryside did not show any protest either. But, after some time, about two years or so later, taxation on peasants, traders, industrialists, as well as on other working people was increased manifold for the luxury of army officers, and in order to buy and reproduce military weaponry. In general the life of the people lacked peace and was filled with anxiety; it was not any better than before. (143-144)

F. THE LAND QUESTION AND THE DERGUE

One of the major achievements of the 1974 revolution was that it abolished the feudal land-tenure system in Ethiopia. Land reform had long been needed and was eagerly awaited by the peasants. When it was announced in the form of a decree in 1975, all land, "including the vast acres once owned by the church," was nationalized in accordance with the "Ethiopian" socialist program that was declared by the military government at that time. The decree stated further that no one was "allowed to farm more than ten hectares;" and that the peasants would till the land collectively. ("Ethiopia: Stress and Strains" 5). Many peasants benefitted from this program. As Markakis put it, "the mass of tenants in the south were freed of landlord exactions and, since the Church was not excluded, some benefit was also gained in the north" (241). But, despite its increasingly repressive tendency, the new regime was also credited for this by the people.

As has been pointed out elsewhere, in Gubunya's fiction, land is at first in the hands of feudal landlords in the island of Israelos. When the military government of Marshall Japheros takes over, some kind of land reform is carried out and the inhabitants of the island, although both disappointed and

frightened by the new regime, nevertheless seem thankful for the government giving them land. Thus, whereas the hero is usually unconditionally critical of the government of Japheros and its workings, at one point in the novel we find the narrator saying:

Because those who were appointed to power and high posts were only army officers, many learned people could not get the chance to join government institutions; they had to satisfy themselves by taking trade and agricultural employments. I had realized all this when I was coming from our work place [i.e. the community farm] to the city. It is true, no claimant has come to steal the land I cultivated. Although, by looking at this only, I cannot say that all has been good to the people. (144-145)

G. THE DERGUE AND POLITICAL DEMOCRACY

By early 1977, writes John Markakis, the Dergue "had undergone two more violent purges of its own, which claimed the lives of several leading members, including the second PMAC chairman, General Teferi Bante" (243). As he further noted, Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam had by then become the undisputed chief of the Dergue and the PMAC, and the regime's notorious campaign of execution of civilian masses and political opponents was officially introduced under the label "Red Terror." As if this were not enough,

At the height of the 'Red Terror' in mid-1977 came the Somali invasion of the Ogaden. The Dergue's fortunes were at their lowest ebb at that point. The Somali cut off the railway line to Djibuti, an Afar uprising threatened the road to Asab where the oil refinery is located, and the Eritreans were besieging Massawa, Ethiopia's third port of entry. Another dissident nationalist movement had appeared in Tigray, and its guerillas were harassing traffic on the main road artery to Eritrea. Encouraged by all this, the remnants of the imperial regime made a coordinated attempt at counter revolution. They organised the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) in London, secured bases in the eastern Sudan, and commenced operations in western Ethiopia, where they captured two border towns in March 1977. It was at this time also that the link with the United States was finally broken, when

Washington announced the suspension of aid to Ethiopia, citing civil rights violations as the reason. The military regime survived, thanks to the prompt action of the Soviet Union, which came to its aid with massive military provisions that began to arrive in Ethiopia a couple of months after the Somali invasion. Hundreds of Soviet advisers followed, as well as thousands of Cuban troops and a tank unit from South Yemen. (Markakis 243)

Compare this suffocating scenery of a garrison state to Gubunya's description of similar situation (in Israelos). The main protagonist is in the streets of the capital city, Akhanio, as the following hallucinatory images whirl through his mind:

Having fought, ceaselessly fought, throughout my entire life, on the fifth day of my fifty second anniversary I went to my hometown where everything had changed. When I entered the town, things did not look right. On each person's face there was fear and doubt. It was only army officers who walked with their feet firmly planted on the ground.

In this town, where the innocent and the peaceful live, tanks swamped the streets, making the movement of ordinary traffic, cars, difficult, in fact, impossible. Soldiers with automatic rifles on their shoulders, modern guns, pistols and knives round their waists and wearing iron helmets on their heads were strolling in the streets, everywhere. I could not understand why this display of power was needed. Of course I knew there had been a change of government in the country and that the new regime had gone bankrupt. Yet I could not figure out why internal changes require such a hustle. Besides, it is a long time ago that the changes took place; four years, almost five years, have passed since then.

... The offices which had been filled with civilian authorities in the past were now filled with military authorities wearing uniforms decorated with medals.

From the minister(s) down to the heads of departments, all army officers and even the messenger boys were soldiers. Where had all those civilian workers gone? From the civilian workers the ones who remained in their place were only those whose work was related to army matters: the police. Could it be that news of war had been heard, and all the people in the country had turned soldiers? How were we left out then? Who'd know!!! (153-154)

Despite its own slogans like “freedom,” “liberty,” and “equality,” the military regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam was no exception to the rule. Like all military dictatorships, it saw the presence of an independent press inimical to its existence. According to Alem Mezgebe (1978), under the Dergue, just as under the monarch, there was no room for any form of critical expression:

The military coup of September 1974 brought its own brand of mind control, and the flicker of hope ignited by the February Revolution was extinguished. Although the former censors remained in their posts, the military junta assigned a captain and a major to oversee the work of the press, radio and television.

Since the ‘revolution,’ every song, old or new, has been censored. Some are played with verses deleted, some have been shelved permanently.... Love songs have been banned from radio and TV for good. Now during listener-choice programmes one hears people dedicating martial music to their loved ones. In addition, under the military dictatorship, as under the old regime, the hunt goes on for hidden subversive messages in everything that is said or written.... The Eritrean question remains the most glaring example of censorship in Ethiopia, both under the old regime and the Dergue. At no time has there been any attempt to give the Ethiopian people a clear picture of the Eritrean national liberation struggle, although it constituted, along with the 1973 ‘hidden famine’ and the archaic land tenure system, the leit-motif of the February 1974 Revolution which brought to an end the autocracy of the late Emperor. (19-20)

The situation of the freedom of press and speech in Japheros’s Israelos is that,

while some private newspapers were brought under the control of the military government, and others were closed down, politicians who showed some signs of discontent about the life of the people were arrested and put in jail without trial. No one had the right, either in speech or through writing, to express his ideas freely, unless it was to praise the military government and to criticise the rich of the past. The parliament, once closed, was not restored. No one single person had the right of assembly, or the right to hold a demonstra-

tion in order to protest or even to voice his complaints.
(Gubenyā 144)

After more than 17 years of dictatorial rule and conducting bloody wars of all kinds against the Ethiopian opposition and the Eritreans, the Dergue faced defeat in May 1991, when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) fully liberated Eritrea (after 30 years of bitter struggle), and the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) forces took over the entire country. Having exhausted the material and political resources at his disposal, the Dergue's leader and strongman, Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam, was forced to flee to Mugabe's Zimbabwe to save his life.

It is to be remembered, of course, that the novel *Alwelledim* does not end in a similar fashion. Apart from the fact that Japheros's fate is different from Mengistu's (Japheros compromisingly takes a seat in the new government), it is only when the subsequent government that replaces the repressive regime of Japheros also turns dictatorial, now resulting in the death of the hero, that the novel closes. And, naturally, how the Ethiopian political arena will look in the coming years under the leadership of President Zenawi is difficult to tell. Yet, notwithstanding the present government's reiterated commitment to democracy, the political situation in the country is still very fluid. This is to say that the probability that the present government, or any other government that replaces it under the present conditions, could gradually (just as the second regime in *Alwelledim*) develop into a dictatorship is a real one; the country has no tradition of democracy, and there is no assurance that anything (except good faith, of course) can guarantee that this will not happen.

H. CONCLUSION

In this essay I have tried to demonstrate the relationship between politics and literature in *Alwelledim*. Three things have become clear in this paper:

1. *Alwelledim* is a political novel that reflects Ethiopia's political reality between the years 1960 and 1991, and perhaps beyond.
2. In a more specific sense Abe Gubenyā's *Alwelledim* is a novel that is critical of the sociopolitical realities in Ethiopia.

3. By identifying the resemblances between what Gubanya imagined of the post-Haile-Selassie political scenario and what actually happened in reality, I have argued that the hero of *Alwelledim* can be seen as a prophetic protagonist of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. This has been brought to the fore by spotlighting significant issues such as the land question, democracy, freedom of the press, and the initial and final phases of the Dergue.

Whether or not the Dergue or some of its influential members have used ideas from *Alwelledim* as a practical guide, especially during the early phases of the revolution, is something that remains an intriguing paradox.

During the reign of Haile-Selassie, *Alwelledim* was banned immediately after its publication and all copies were burned. The author, Abe Gubanya, as he related it himself in a new preface to the novel after the fall of the Emperor, was, to say the least, constantly harassed by the police and censors. After the Dergue took power in 1974, *Alwelledim* came into print again, and the book was read with acclaim by large numbers of Ethiopians in all walks of life. However, as time went by and the Dergue grew more and more repressive, the novel was considered a threat and was banned once again. It is also believed that the author's sudden and unexplained death some years ago was the work of the same hands that banned this remarkable book.

NOTES

1. All translations in this article are mine. [G.N.]
2. I follow here the view of most scholars who have written on Ethiopia. For example, John Markakis, who I believe is the most informed expert on post-imperial Ethiopia, has expressed this view in his book *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1990; originally published by CUP in 1987).
3. There is every indication in *Alwelledim*, and the Amharic reader can easily gather, that the journalists cannot exercise their profession genuinely because of a heavy hand of censorship in the press, although the word "censorship" is not mentioned explicitly in the book.

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From Apologist To Critic: The Dilemma Of Bealu Girma

Taddessa Adera



Is there such a thing as freedom? Do we have choices? Do we know why we choose one thing over another? Do we choose to die or live? We live for reasons we don't know, and we die without knowing the time and the cause of our death. The short time we have between life and death does not give us any choice at all. Oh! how life is so meaningless!*

(*Derasiw* 128)

If Sirak, the protagonist in Bealu Girma's novel *Derasiw* (which literally means "the writer") is not a self-portrait, the author certainly speaks to his readers through this character. Sirak enunciates the ideals, values, philosophy of life, and even the political stance of his creator. Both character and creator are

* All translations in this chapter are mine. [T.A.]

writers who have a bleak outlook on life, both profess that "writing is [their] life" (*Derasiw* 99), and both realize that the bureaucracy and the censors have strong grips on artists in Ethiopia. However, while Sirak still lives in the pages of his author, the whereabouts of his creator have been unknown since April 1984 ("Writers in Prison" 23).

When the author, who in many ways is similar to his character, says he believes that "we live life on credit" (*Derasiw* 142) and adds that he cannot understand "why one is so anxious to live in this world" (*Derasiw* 46), he might seem to be predicting his own disappearance or death. Perhaps not surprisingly then, one Thursday evening in 1984, not long after his novel *Oromai* was published, Bealu Girma was seen for the last time while socializing with friends.

Derasiw, published in 1980, was a novel that suggested things to come in Bealu Girma's writing, but it was *Oromai* that secured his reputation and probably sealed his fate. *Oromai* shook Ethiopia and caught it by surprise like a massive explosive thrown into the middle of a busy street. *Oromai*, which loosely translated means *c'est la vie* (some translate it as "Enough," "*Déjà vu*," "It is Over," "Gone are the Good Old Days"), was published in 1983 in Addis Abeba by Kuraz publishers. "After 500 copies were sold in 24 hours, it was taken out of the bookstores and suspended from circulation. People caught reading it were arrested. Still 'xeroxed' copies circulated in all major cities" (Wolde-Giorgis 110). Ironically, the book even made its way to the maximum security prison in Addis Abeba where many political prisoners had been held for years. After its banning, the novel was reportedly sold for 1020 Birr (roughly about 500 U.S. dollars) on the black market by those same government officials ("*Be Hulet Dingiwotch...*" 3). Girma was, of course, "immediately removed from his post with a letter that disgraced him. Mengistu [the head of state] refused to give him permission to be employed anywhere else" (Wolde-Giorgis 110).

Girma's fall is a grimly intriguing matter, for he was not only a writer but also a political appointee of the same government that rejected him. At one time, he was editor of the state-owned daily newspaper *Addis Zemen*; another time, the director-general of the Ministry of Information; and later, not long before he was removed from his post, he was the chief of

propaganda of the Red Star Campaign in Eritrea. Moreover, one of his books, *Ye Kei Kokeb Tiri (The Call of Red Star)*, is a partisan novel which seems to condone Mengistu's venomous attack on the youth of Ethiopia during the infamous "Red Terror." So Girma's *Oromai* was, in the government's view, an act of treason. It led to the end of his career and his life.

Girma's quarrel with Mengistu's government started soon after he was appointed chief of propaganda for the Red Star Campaign. Mengistu had hoped that Girma's new novel would praise his government's handling of the war in Eritrea. According to *Asreji*, an Amharic-language magazine published in Los Angeles, Mengistu personally encouraged Girma to write a novel about the Red Star Campaign; and he also gave Girma the permission and support to publish the novel ("*Be Hulet Dingiawoch. . .*" 6). Wolde-Giorgis agrees with this reasoning in his book *Red Tears*, but he argues that Fikre-Sellasie, the chief of ideology and the second in command to Mengistu, was the one who approved the publication of Girma's novel (110). Whoever gave Girma the permission, *Oromai* became a bomb-shell aimed at the very government which encouraged him to write it in the first place.

The novel's 370 pages castigate the Mengistu government as corrupt, greedy, avaricious, and maladministered. For the most part, however, the novel maintains its focus on the war in Eritrea. Girma strongly opposes the secession movement in Eritrea, as does the government, and supports the unity of Ethiopia. He goes to great lengths in the novel to "teach" his readers a history lesson about the "origin" of Eritrea (74-84 and 116-119) and the problems created after the British occupation and administration in the 1940s.

Oromai, however, indicts the government of Mengistu for its failure to provide Eritrea with leadership and organization, especially during the so-called Red Star Campaign in 1981. Mengistu then had boasted that he would put an end to the region's 20-year-old secession movement with a 90-day military campaign against the EPLF (Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front). The effort was also supposed to help rebuild and rehabilitate the wartorn cities and villages of Eritrea. This, however, remained a dream for Mengistu and company, primarily because they had underestimated the power and strength of the EPLF.

One character in Girmé's novel, Colonel Betru Tesema, who is also the head of the Central Intelligence Division, claims that at the beginning of the Ethiopian Revolution in 1974, the forces of the EPLF did not number more than 450. But between 1975 and 1977 alone, about 10,000 new members joined because the government failed to provide desperately needed leadership (*Oromai* 117). Many young people fled from Asmara and the villages to the bush because they feared for their lives. Elsewhere in the novel, Tesema says it was inevitable that people would do anything to escape the horror when mass arrests, mass trials, and mass murder became routine. The colonel blames the government and its officials for this situation, and not the innocent civilians fleeing to join the guerillas out of fear and desperation.

In addition to the terror campaign which uprooted many Eritreans (thereby increasing the military might of the EPLF), there were many other reasons why Mengistu's government lost Eritrea's favor. Bealu Girma clearly speaks through his characters: Colonel Betru Tesema reviles the greedy and power-hungry officials who were in Eritrea to amass wealth for themselves and to satisfy their political ambitions. Such leaders claimed to stand for the revolution while condoning corruption and terror. Surprisingly, these same devious officials were entrusted with bringing peace and stability to Eritrea and the country at large.

That there was no unified leadership among the military, the secret services, and other government institutions operating in Eritrea seems obvious. Each official was a satrap who answered only to himself. In *Oromai*, we learn that in addition to the city police, there were at least three different "investigative" groups, each with its own prison, its own court, its own killing squad, and its own common graveyard. In their own compounds, they detained and tortured without warrants, they killed without trials, in the process confiscating property without due process. One such group operated under the auspices of the Fifteenth Brigade, which was assigned at that time to keep peace and order in Asmara (*Oromai* 118). Another was the joint command, which was notorious for its secret killing squads that would maim and hang their victims. The third was actually sent from Addis Abeba by the Dergue's own special investigative branch, and was busy, like the others, accomplishing mass

arrests, kidnapping, torture, and murder (*Oromai* 119).

According to Girma, hatred was the primary force behind all the atrocities. Hatred for all Eritreans stemmed from a narrow-minded Ethiopian nationalism among top government officials, even in the military. For instance, we learn that the militia never knew “why and what for it was fighting. It was operating under the assumption that all Eritreans [were] rebels” (*Oromai* 118). As a result, militiamen looted villages and indiscriminately killed and raped.

Colonel Betru Tesema, the character who provides us with all this background information, and who at times serves as a critic of the government, nonetheless insists in *Oromai* that these atrocities were committed earlier, before Mengistu became ascendent in February 1977. The colonel, who is also an apologist for the Dergue, says, “all this is past history. Our revolution has attained democratic centralism [now].” And this, he says, entails, “the responsibilities of respecting basic human rights” (119). Historical accounts prove different, however. Unfortunately, in the killing fields of Ethiopia, thousands of people were summarily executed without charges, and tens of thousands languished in prison without being charged or convicted.

Girma further exposes the failures of Mengistu’s government when he focuses on operation Red Star. The historical records show that on January 26, 1982, three days after the EPLF forces destroyed the airport in Asmara and annihilated two garrisons, “Mengistu launched the multifaceted Red Star Campaign on military, ideological, political, organizational, cultural and economic fronts ‘to end once and for all the organized banditry’” (Pateman 83). According to Dawit Wolde-Giorgis, chief of COPWE (The Commission to Organize the Party of Workers of Ethiopia) in Asmara, and an official who is portrayed in *Oromai* by a character named Solomon Betre-Giorgis, Mengistu named this multifaceted operation “Red Star” in response to American soldiers who were conducting a military exercise in the Red Sea. He says that “Mengistu [one day] came to a meeting furious and said, ‘They [Americans] call their operation ‘Bright Star’ so we’ll name ours ‘Red Star!’ When they see our show of force they’ll see that we can’t be blackmailed by American arrogance. We will decimate the [rebel] forces they are arming’” (Wolde-Giorgis 107-108).

Hundreds of Ethiopian experts were handpicked by Mengistu himself and brought to Asmara. Among them was Bealu Girma, who became the campaign's chief of propaganda.

The government claimed that operation Red Star was a success, but Girma personally saw things differently, and said this in *Oromai*, where various characters argue that the campaign came to a dead end soon after it started primarily because it lacked planning, organization, and conviction on the part of its leaders. Some of these leaders were uneducated and inexperienced, but because they professed their conviction for the revolution they were appointed to governmental posts. Others were simply there to satisfy their hunger for political power and material gain. It is such people, says the chief of intelligence in the novel, who are found causing irreparable damage, killing innocent people, and looting property. The fictional intelligence also acknowledges that socialism is despised and condemned by the majority of the population because of such gluttonous and blood-thirsty individuals (108).

Girma's characters are based on the actual Dergue-appointed officials and parallel their lives in many respects. As Dawit Wolde-Giorgis says, Girma "wrote it [the book] as a novel, changing all the names, but it was obvious who was who" (110). For instance, the character Tedla Regassa is supposed to represent Fisaha Geda, who was the chief of protocol; Betru Tesema is patterned on the security chief, Tesfaye Wolde-Sellasia; Meshafe Daniel is the economist Fasika Sidelel; Yeshitla Masresha is the ideologue, Shimelise Mazengia; the COPWE Chief in Eritrea, Solomon Betre Giorgis, is Dawit-Wolde-Giorgis; and the chief of propaganda in Eritrea, Tsegaye Haile-Mariam, is supposed to be Bealu Girma himself (some say that he is the TV anchorperson Getachew Haile-Mariam). Most of them are now imprisoned by the present Ethiopian government.

All these and others were hand picked by Mengistu and appointed to solve the problems facing the region. Almost all of them were from the military, and their solution to the problem, most often, was brute force. One character in *Oromai*, Major Garedew Mekonen, stands out as an example. Some would do anything to sustain their individual comfort. Many of those who came from Addis Abeba are found crowding bars and frequenting prostitutes. Some, like the fictional Major

Taddesse Koritchu, are blatantly corrupt and use their power and influence to enrich themselves. They are paid large sums of money by the so-called enemy forces to abuse their power. And some other characters, like Meshafe Daniel, are indifferent both to the revolution and to the campaign in Eritrea for their own personal and ideological reasons.

"Power," says the narrator of *Oromai*, "corrupts" and "makes people cruel" (39, 46). This is what the people of Eritrea in general, and those of Asmara in particular, have had to endure. The very campaign which was supposed to alleviate the suffering and burden of innocent Eritreans ended up in doing just the opposite. As the character Lieutenant Ashebir, the Dergue's security agent, reports the situation to his boss:

People [in Asmara] are tense and panic-stricken [and] fearing that something dreadful is going to happen, everybody is always home early. The streets are deserted . . . There is not enough food in the market; and if there is some, it is unaffordable. The people are starving. A dangerous situation is being created. The city residents are afraid for their lives. (115)

Indeed, the historical record shows "some 710,000 people in Eritrea were affected by drought" (Pateman 85). There was also a significant drop in the population of Asmara: "in 1975 it was 301,600 and in 1983, 275,400. In December 1979 there had been only 90,000 people in the capital. In 1988 it was reported that 'no one leaves the city, even for an hour, without written permission from the City Hall'" (Pateman 87).

On the military front as well the government suffered a series of setbacks. By the end of the novel, we learn that the war in Nacfa and other parts of Eritrea still continues. In the actual battle for Nacfa, according to Dawit Wolde-Giorgis:

the Ethiopian Army lost 11,000 soldiers and hundreds more wounded or captured . . . Every hope of ending the conflict was dashed at Nacfa. Instead of the final victory, it became a symbol of misplaced priorities . . . In Asmara, no one could talk about the defeat. Everyone in the government spoke in hushed tones. Three weeks after Nacfa, Mengistu and all the ministers went back to Addis. The war continued even more intensely. (109)

The battle for Nacfa and the Red Star Campaign were indeed "misplaced priorities," considering the existing chances for political solutions. A poor nation like Ethiopia could not afford to increase its battalions (divisions) from four to twelve instantly, or to spend three-fourths of its national budget on the war effort. The militaristic approach did not bring about any tangible solution for either the bombarded and uprooted Eritreans, or the conscripted, tax-burdened, and wallet-empty Ethiopians. The mood in Addis Abeba itself was fear and political and economic chaos. As the fiancée of *Oromai's* narrator bitterly describes it, every day became a campaign in Ethiopia: "we have created a culture of campaigns. Can a day come when we can live and die without campaigning?" (7)

Ethiopians were also tired of attending endless hours of forced meetings both at their work and at their *Kebeles* (precinct organizations created by the Dergue), with lengthy speeches and the chanting of meaningless slogans. In the novel the narrator expresses his disgust:

Speech! Speech! Speech! the significant marker of our era. Some people might have started associating socialism with lengthy speeches. A lot of speech, but very little work. No! Some link socialism to meetings. Meetings! Meetings! Meetings! Review! Review! Review! A lot of reviews, a number of meetings, but few results. Some others may have associated it with slogans. Slogans! Slogans! Slogans! In addition to these, it is incredible to believe that we are always in a hurry. Action! There is no time to love, to rest, and to die. (46)

Indeed, Bealu Girma is unflinching in criticizing the system: he characterizes a gang of military rulers who are inexperienced and incompetent; a war which cannot be won; a bureaucracy which is inefficient and self-serving; and a middle class which, in effect, has become parasitic. He exposes the outright corruption and mismanagement of the country by the powers that be and contrasts it with the burden the ordinary Eritreans and Ethiopians have had to bear. Oddly, however, while criticizing almost every person in power working for the Dergue, he spares Mengistu Haile-Mariam. In fact, he portrays Mengistu as a wise, courageous, and efficient leader, whose only interest is the country's future. Both the narrator and the author seem to be saying that Mengistu is the best thing that has ever hap-

pened to Ethiopia.

Some people may argue that Girma had to play it safe in this characterization, in order to stay alive and to get his novel published. Nevertheless, the endless, unwarranted, and monotonous quotes supposedly from Mengistu's speeches and from the testimony of other characters about Mengistu seem to undercut this argument. In fact, it is possible to conclude that Bealu Girma earnestly believed in Mengistu's leadership ability. How can one otherwise explain the ten-page lecture by Mengistu, which is quoted almost verbatim in the novel, or the inclusion of the entire Asmara Manifesto? And how else can one understand the constant praise of Mengistu by the narrator? That the narrator/author sides with Mengistu is certain; and this personal blind spot, along with Girma's preachy characters who tend to lecture each other rather than hold a dialogue, are obvious weaknesses in the novel.

These weaknesses, however, do not diminish the power of the novel and the clear stand the author has taken against the bureaucracy and the Dergue. And for this he paid with his life. As soon as the novel was published and Girma was removed from his post, Mengistu himself personally "refused to give him permission to be employed anywhere else....When it was suggested that Bealu [Girma] be arrested, Mengistu said: 'That will be too obvious. The book is out and it's our fault we allowed it to be published. Putting him in jail will make him and his book more popular. For now we'll just remove him from his position. Once the rumors are over, we'll deal with him.'" Girma was informed that the government was out to get him, but "he didn't see any way to escape the inevitable" (Wolde-Giorgis 110-111). He disappeared soon; and no one, including his family, knows where he is after all these years. According to The Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN, around April 1984, some months after Girma was dismissed from his job, his car was found outside Addis Abeba. Many people now believe that he has been extrajudicially executed ("Writers in Prison" 23). Amnesty International filed a similar report emphasizing Girma's mysterious "disappearance" or "abduction." In its report of June 1991, the organization states:

In April, 1984 Bealu Girma, a well-known writer and journalist, "disappeared" after being last seen driving his car in

Addis Abeba. There were apparently no witnesses to what happened to him, but it is widely believed that he was abducted by the security police. Bealu Girma, a former editor of the Amharic daily newspaper *Addis Zemen*, was Vice-Minister of Information at the time of his abduction. He had just published a novel in Amharic, *Oromiya* ("Enough"). The book had been cleared by the censors and the political authorities but was reputed to contain indirect criticism of the government for failing to settle the Eritrean dispute by political means. The government has never commented officially on his "disappearance." ("Ethiopia: End of an Era" 37)

In his other novel, *Derasiw*, Girma seemed to be predicting his own fate when he spoke through his character Sirak:

I don't have any plans on how to live life except simply existing. The purpose of life is merely living. I live this little precious piece of life, like Abraham without dwelling in a house, and like Moses nobody knowing the site of my grave. I survive and write with the hope of living in the future and looking back at the past. (209)

Indeed, this is prophetic. Just as no one knows the grave of Moses, no one knows where Girma is buried. One thing is certain though: the novel *Oromai* has immortalized Bealu Girma. In *Derasiw*, his main character, Sirak, argues that "under no circumstances should a writer write for money" or to seek political power (193). Certainly, Girma seems to have lived what his character preaches. Girma was, at first, a strong supporter and an apologist of Mengistu's government, as evidenced in his earlier works like *Ye Kei Kokeb Tiri*, and his acceptance of various political appointments; but by the time the Red Star Campaign was put into effect, not only had he distanced himself from the government, but he also had taken a firm stand against the self-serving and corrupt bureaucracy and the lack of conviction, planning, and leadership of the military. Girma has cleared his name by daring to write *Oromai*; the novel, in turn, has venerated its creator by setting the record straight.

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The Poem and Its Matrix

Solomon Deressa



POEM TO THE MATRIX

image and syllable part like the Eritrean Sea
Somalia disintegrates at the tight end of unity
highlander, eyes shut, chase a cat's-tail atonement
dreamer and dream now live and die lives apart

Sabeen images gone, the syllabary stays behind
going this way, then that, before deciding on left to
right...

leeching first on prophetic sleight-o'hand then on part-
ing waves

then on redemption, here as elsewhere, shorn of com-
passion.

arcane allusions separate lofty brow from dancing feet
in-bred decorum licks the door to primal mystery——
only the occasional song leaks between door and wall
to repeat what we've heard thrice before.

the poem, rebus, sound, vow to the para-verbal,
speech rooted in wombs adjacent to the Seat of Power,
the *Egzi-O*, the *Ill-la-Hu*, the *Wy...Wy...Wy*, the
Ouh...Ouh...Ouh, the *Om Ah Hum...*
repeatedly re-incarnates. Or is not born at all.
the Seat of Power, ever present at the play of light and

shade, crumbles where table, picture, printer,
petals, lips or cheeks intrude,
& lovely time rides in on a whiff of baking bread, the
softness of skin
and the sweetness of breath. Ah! how separation
harbors yearning...

love, the first begotten of pulsating light tells
a harsh story [Lucifer's?]
tells of separation and infinite yearning, turns being
into cadence...
in anxious confinement apes masturbate against panic
[improper]
with order abstraction, we side-step the
moment [immoral]

& rhythm becomes time...and matter moves...stream-
ing
& speech reaches to image beyond expedient
abstraction... [a poem?]
we, who have been fragmented by serif and sound-bite
who've covered our tracks back to the silence before the
first scream
whose tongues can no more move the weight of jaded
words,
wait, though no one knows we are waiting. [why?]

frittered sounds of Oromo, Amharic, Tigrinya, Somali
and the forty-four and forty-four other tongues...

[wherefore?]

how long pretend that life and death did not trade
places
& this, the redemptive crucible and not the crotch-
point of choices?

store the scream of forty-four tongues tearing?
[how?]
mind your syllables! my shattering is organic, marrow
deep...
lie with me in pieces or do not speak at all
replicate the howl of the torture dungeon or say no
more. [poem?]

the learned barely glimpse their own noses
burnt-face Marxists have proved that, if proof there
need be
extrapolating the future out of a past not worth the
inventing.
As if the past can be counted upon to count!

the past is merely the present limping [did I say
that?]
(it takes more than good-will to walk backward
straight)
the past has no dimensions, the past cannot see cannot
hear
barely be seen, barely heard—and heard to grant what
we already have.

later is now unlived, half-ass fantasized, a shadowless
dark-alley trick...
(would you hire the dead & the unbegotten even as
boundary markers
time's territorial response to panic, a dog's scattered
piss
presence cat-napping and coming-to in fits and starts?)

Why else would tectonic plates collide, stars implode,
[panic?]

and the acorn leave eternal encapsulation to stand millennia at best
[talk of perverse ego!] and the bitch carry a yelping litter to term
when mother and pup will turn to everywhich master for love?

so the epistasis begins at the still point
and spreads in swells as the heart sinks:
beaches Goddesses and Gods disoriented whales
kings and queens priest and priestesses all manner of demons
dictators and controllers and toe-suckers and rulers and attendants to the their divinities and majesties and sanctities
for like the pup they insist they be attended to ...
holy shit! all this radiance, all this horror, out of panic!

et la gloire de dieu n'aura pas lieu

just like you
I too am born of this...like you like the shattered star
like the tectonic itch inching toward the rapture in the colossal rub
one pup in a litter burning with the ardor of an inflated galaxy...

like you like her like him like it like us like them

in panic I left...and in panic I launch me home
be it no launching be possible for the present be already here
impenetrable to aggression piety yearning or to seduction...

it is hard core

the saint and the hero are unwelcome here [did I tell you that?]
their ulterior motive are a given,
they lack the blinding speed that curls into immobility

the no-mind of the sperm, the ovum's hospitality...

the drying river, the crumbling mountain, the sand
that rides the wind
and the twice forty-four tongues of the Horn do not recognize them...

they speak of ancestral glory, and tomorrow's promise
to the millennium
unaware that though they utter every name, there will
be yet unuttered names...

always. And tongues of flame will lick again,
words like wet-land weeds will reach for the sun
the young woman will smile for no reason at all
and silently ask, how did all this begin?

(English rendition)

*** ***** ***

MATRICES OF HORN POETRY

Is this a catch-as-catch-can at the keyboard where the jagged lines of non-prose and the justified margins of common discourse mix willy-nilly as it pleases the writer? Don't you, the reader, have the right to know what to expect even in this post-Mengistu/Barre era? Are you this time face to face with a paper *amba-guenen*, a self-anointed lord of the highest mesa? Hardly. I write as I do because how I declaim the poem as well as what follows is more an urgent personal need than a technique intended to help or hinder. Somehow it seems to fit our current condition, yours and mine, perhaps because there is no way to divorce the poem from the land. The real question is: can we continue to speak of Ethiopian Poetry as this Western century draws to a close seven years ahead of the Ethiopian? Is it time to be thinking rather of poetries from the Horn of Africa?

Two decades of psychotic terror (1970-1990) have left behind changes that are permanent. Depending on how attached you were to your class, religion, linguistic group, gender, regional provenance, or political cult, these changes have come to you as irretrievable losses, or miraculous gains that justify your having survived the hellish years we've all had to be born into or live through. Nor is this the first time that such

atrocities have been committed against the peoples of the Horn of Africa in the name of some ornate ideal. Sporadic psychosis has roamed the long span of our histories, it seems to me, guaranteed to be written up as "our glorious past" perhaps because gore tends to make as good copy for historians as it does for tabloid journalists.

Be that as it may, as a result of these changes, we, Amharas, Eritreans, Guragais, Oromos, Somalis, Tigras, and the owners of four score other names (whatever these names have come to mean to each one of us in these times of contested and fast-shifting identities) have had to learn to re-conceptualize, re-emote and re-member Ethiopia, Eritrea, Oromia, or Somalia, and consequently our individual selves. If our poets are fast at work capturing the sparks and sounds of bewilderment and pain we give off as we splinter and shatter, their words are not reaching us loud enough to help us externalize and objectify our pain. Monolithic Ethiopia, of whose existence I was as certain in 1974 as I have ever been of anything in my life, is no more. Not even as an invention. It disappeared with the fall of Emperor Haile-Selassie.

It has taken me a dozen years of loitering in the sloughs of Western universities, more to survive than to be edified, to finally admit that what had happened was more than the routing of a regime long out of touch with the land and the people it ruled. I, like you, an escapee from an apocalyptic nightmare, a man who left his heart in the heartlands of Ethiopia (but remembered to pack a *witness ego*, more as a hedge against total disintegration in a foreign land than as a vehicle to truth or wisdom) am deponent to the end of a world. The only world I knew. Perhaps the only one that I will ever truly know. Crawling, standing up, and walking upright had to be re-learned. What a heartbreak! Not the effort to learn but the initial loss. Only a few years separate the beginning of Derg rule from Gabre-Kristos Desta's lines:

All is gone

Forgotten the hour, the day has changed. The year of grace
the summer, the spring, autumn and the rains.

The home you lived in

bed, table, rug, the chair

The windows and the door

the picture, the wall, all changed by your absence.

Having mourned the end of a way of life that offered more hope than satisfaction, what else was there but to sink into rage at the inescapable reality that a religion on its way out, a catechism already discarded by its prime preachers, was herding my friends into torture, my sisters to rape, my sons and daughter to slaughter, prison, exile, and dissipation!

This is not to deny Marxism its due as a tool of Western literary and economic analysis, but rather to point out the simple fact that the usefulness of any tool is always a matter of context. Marx, an intellect in direct line of descent from the great prophets of the peoples of the book, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, Mohammed, was the last mentor we needed, and not because religion is without worth, but because there is something in the waters of our part of the world that render us all too vulnerable to every passing apocalyptic vision. For the American literati to espouse Marxian thought is one thing, for us to have attempted to do so has proved quite another. For better or worse, the Westerners' rebellion seldom begins in the political realm. By the time they get to that, other rebellions (against parents, the church, their intellectual predecessors) have already taught them how to dismantle and rebuild on the very foundations they trample under foot. To this overly simplified statement one can add that the context of Marxian analysis was the Industrial Revolution, i.e., a rampant technology that, to date, seems to be more easily accessible to those who have hung on to Confucianism than to those who have tried to deny the reality of the face in the mirror, in this case, the African face.

And yet, it would be disingenuous to blame our woes on Marxism, Christianity, or Islam. In fact, one of the striking points of the histories of the region is that none of these religions penetrated our lands as a conquering world view. Each was systematically imported and then disseminated at the point of native-honed swords. I exclude Judaism not because it was any less a sought-after import it was, in fact, our first experiment in wholesale introjection of world systems grown elsewhere, but because, to our eternal shame, the Bete Israel are now Israelis, as much children of the Ethiopian diaspora as those of us marooned in Japan.

Hearts were broken *à tort et à travers*. Some of us escaped alive only to die of intractable inner pain. Others quietly went numb. And still others sat in evening shadows and watched for the morning sun to rise while the shadows continued to lengthen. What else? Good, indifferent or bad, life as we knew it, the matrices in which the complexities of our beings were embedded, the world for which we had fashioned communal speech, no matter how inadequate, had vanished into pain beyond imagination. Slow down for a moment. Put this paper down and stay put. If you are Amhara, Oromo, Eritrean, or Somali, or any of the other identities, and of a certain age, you have looked in the mirror and seen the face of death. To look at a picture of Captain Mengistu and not see an aspect of yourself would require royal self-indulgence, and the morning is not dawning to suit royalty.

Mengistu and I are the products of the same school system that Emperor Haile-Selassie masterminded. Like it or not, Mengistu, you and I were poisoned by the same Ministries-of-Education-and-Information propaganda that taught us a form of patriotism that sustained a 30-year war in Eritrea and now stokes the inter-ethnic and cross-religious hatred which is going to drive the broad-front discourse in which we shall have to engage for decades to come. I can tell you just as well as any honest Eritrean of my age can, that despite the inflamed romanticism of Western journalists, in 1970, the secession of Eritrea was about as likely as its re-unification to Ethiopia now seems. The question, though, is not what non-Ethiopians or non-Eritreans were saying or failing to say, but what the Eritreans and Amharas, Oromos, etc., were and are themselves saying. Nor is it enough to point to the politico-economic and sociological analyses that go on and on without giving us the words we need to name all these seemingly unnameable feelings, thoughts, premonitions with which all those who are at least awake to their own predicament must contend. In an intentional universe the perennial need of our corner of paradise would not be abundant rainfall. It would be Amhara voices in defence of the Oromo and the Tigray, Oromo voices in defence of...why list the twice 44 ethnic groups, you can see what I am getting at. Never in our long histories have such voices abounded. Thus have we failed to nurture a livable land and the poems that might take root in it.

What is missing is neither education in the formal sense nor intelligence as the world commonly understands it, but rather the desire to squeeze out of communal speech what did not seem to be there until the juice is forcibly extracted. Lack of both space and Ethiopian poems in English translation preclude giving examples of what contemporary Ethiopian poems has so far wrought in memoriam to a thrice-raped land. Even G.K. Desta's few lines are my own rendition. A few Ethiopian poems (I have access only to those in Amharic and Oromo) worthy of the most lyrical lines of Mengistu Lemma have appeared in *Imbylta* and *Oromia*. Perhaps the real task that awaits gifted Ethiopian, Eritrean or Somali Americans is the rendition of poetry from the various languages of the Horn into English so that the world, particularly English-speaking Africa, can have access to the hidden aspects of its legitimate patrimony — to the extent that translation can serve such a purpose. Perhaps others will hear us where we have so obstinately feigned deafness of heart and echo back to us our audibility.

Closer to home, the circumstances of poetry cannot be much different in Eritrea. The similarities among us can, in large measure, be traced to the two myths that we were all fed, and the socioeconomic conditions we all lived. The differences, such as they are, reflect the choices that were made for us, the directions imposed on us by officialdom as well as our local communities and our individual responses. Incomprehensible as it may sound to the more determined of my Oromo brothers, living as I do halfway around the world from the Horn, I find it difficult to think of myself as anything but an Oromo Ethiopian. I make neither a vice nor a virtue of this. I simply acknowledge it as I would acknowledge the fact that another Oromo might find it difficult to think of myself as anything but an Oromo Ethiopian. I make neither a vice nor a virtue of this. I simply acknowledge it as I would acknowledge the fact that another Oromo might find the juxtaposition of *Oromo* and *Ethiopian* an oxymoron. Accepting the differences in our configuration, and the ambiguity that they give rise to, is a necessary condition not only for developing a sensibility that can accommodate poetic diction, but also for feeding ourselves in 2021.

The ambiguity of myth and poetry is no mere *wax-and-gold* game. Ambiguity is the lower end of the openness of being,

double-entendre, the higher reaches of clever self-protection. It is no surprise that those who were best at *wax-and-gold* usually plied their trade close to the courts of the king and the nobility where the poet can move or be moved from guffaws to gallows as much according to what the king had for lunch as the polish of the poet's couplets. Remember the royal Gondarine minstrel's encounter with Emperor Theodros? By way of apology for having previously aimed clever barbs at Theodros to curry favor with another war lord, the minstrel sang (my rendition does his lines less than justice):

the upstart minstrel deserves caning
idle tongues backbite the loved and the loving

Theodros, himself no mean versifier, chose not to play by the established rules. He refused to be amused. At the Emperor's pleasure, the minstrel was caned to death. Neither Tekle-Tsadik Mokria, the official Imperial historian, nor my not-always-fair secondary school Ethiopian History instructor, nor, for that matter, my revered grandfather saw anything wrong with this choice morsel of glorious Ethiopiana. So much for the balance between poetry and power. Why search for the proverbial honey and milk to nurture the young when such morsels abound?

It is unfortunate that most people from Addis Abeba cannot imagine how hard it must be for some of my Eritrean schoolmates to break away from Ethiopia, and how hard not to break away. If the Oromos arrive at a similar juncture tomorrow, they too will face the same predicament. How could they not? Do I not oscillate between congratulating my Eritrean friends on their military victory and saying, "You can't be serious! This is it? We part forever, just like that?"

I recall Asmara nights of endless debates awash in local beer in which I was the only non-Eritrean. Two things still stand out: my awareness, even then, of how easy it was to be included, considering that at the level of our debates I was the Other, and how confused my Eritrean interlocutors were as to why the Amharas (they assumed I was Amhara though I am a full-blooded Oromo) would outright refuse to pay attention to what they were trying to tell us. There was no dearth of Eritreans who abhorred the very thought of secession. The

Ethiopian Government responded with contempt. There were Eritreans who felt torn between deep emotional bond to Ethiopia and kinship loyalty to their kith. There were also Eritreans who were so fed-up with what they perceived as inductile “Amhara arrogance” that they were already at least part-time “in the field.”

This inability to hear one another, hardly an Amhara monopoly, in conjunction with the demonic pride we each take in our contempt for the Other, may yet prove our ultimate undoing. Say to a Horn-African, “Your father burned my house down and my only child died in the fire,” and his or her knee-jerk response is likely to be, “How dare you? Since when do the likes of you have the right to mention the likes of my father?” This belligerence, even in the face of basic human pain, is bound to have direct impact not only on civics but also on diction (poetic and otherwise) in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Oromia, Amhara or whatever you or I choose to call the shrinking corners of the continent from which we come.

Despite claims of 3,000 years of written prosody, the heart of Ethiopian poetry has always been, not the *q’ne*, a formalism petrified on the twin beds of complexity and sycophancy to throne and cross, but the relish with which the gifted have wielded their respective mother tongues with a precision that would be the envy of a laser gun-armed surgeon or the spastic power of the jack-hammer operator. However, I would not want to be led by my enthusiasm for the more dynamic and lively forms of Amharic or Oromo poetry to lead me to disparage *q’ne*. Whatever its merits or shortcomings as poetry, I have no doubt that training in *q’ne* (and rigorous training it is) enhances memory, expands attention span, and sharpens and focuses the intellect. In cultures whose contributions to mathematics are minimal at best, the practitioners of *q’ne* may not need to rub shoulders with minstrels, troubadors and poets to continue to be an important thread in the creative fabric.

Leaving the invested authority or *q’ne* aside, there are many possible approaches to classifying power and precision in Amharic poetry alone. Here, I will eschew the traditional approach and mention those forms that, to my knowledge, have not been mentioned in contexts such as this.

At one end, the deeply moving end, you have the *musho*, the *thanatopsic* occasional poem, usually wailed by a woman

poet to connect the living and the dead via the river of tears that *musho* un-dams. The poetic lines are the wailer's; the intoned "*wy wy..wy, wy..*" belongs to respondents who have their own losses to mourn. There is the Oromo *gairersa*, intoned by a male warrior to affirm life, in all its vicissitudes, and the valor of the poet, his brothers-in-arms, and/or his exemplary ancestors. The poet's mother often has a central place. There is the composition of specific meter intended to be set to the *bagana*, the Ethiopian harp. Of significance, though almost totally ignored in discourse on poetry even in learned circles within Ethiopia, are the dawn songs of the *Lallibala*, a whole tribe of troubadours condemned to sing the sun awake lest a fate worse than death befall them. Each of these forms, and several others not mentioned here, is worthy of an independent chapter if not a book.

At the other end, you have the "poetic" use of language, versified or not, that shows the Ethiopian as a put-down virtuoso. Rooted in the psyche of us all from the Horn, the *wax-and-gold* form and wordplay are often clever, at times instructive, but rarely moving. The official reference to the Eritrean guerillas as *agamido* is an example of language militating against reality. If the sonorous proximity of *agamido* and *Agammai* is sheer accident, then this is accident that is part and parcel of incantatory serendipity in the hands of a nation of poets — poets who relish the destructive power of the word above all else. There is nothing remotely insulting about the word *Agammai*. It is simply the name that a Tigrinya-speaking region has proudly carried for centuries. But there is no word in Oromo, Tigrinya, or Amharic that cannot be used as insult. If this is true of all languages, to my knowledge, it is more so of our languages because we have over the centuries fertilized the ground on which these words fall to the same extent that we have denuded the part of the earth that is our hapless home. I am saying that the first battle for Eritrea was lost at the level of language, 30 years before the destruction of Massawa. The Abyssinian prides himself on being congenitally incapable of apprehending that the easiest people to govern are those who find benefit in being governed and that an adversary extolled is more tractable than a berated friend. And no people more willingly accept authority than Ethiopians and Eritreans. Why this should come as news to one ruler after

another is one of the great mysteries.

In the '60s and '70s, the Oromos were fighting in Bale, their mythical place of origin, but they were not yet fighting for independence. Their demands were even more nebulous than those of the Eritreans. I do not recall any text, written or oral, that articulated an independent Oromia. Like others in the Ethiopian tapestry, what they were demanding was "a more equitable share" of the Ethiopian political pie. The Arsi Oromos were asking for even less. They wanted to be treated with the same token respect for their humanity that the governors of Gojam and Beguemed'r held out to the Imperial subjects under their rule. Public perception had it that the then governor of Arsi had a bitch of a time figuring out that the Arsi were Ethiopians and not colonial subjects. The Wollega Oromos barely stirred until the 1972 Nequemte funeral for the Amharic language conducted publicly by high school students incensed by the total diversion of electricity from the Fincha'a Dam (well within the boundaries of Wollega governorate) eastward to Addis Abeba and beyond.

Such eruptions are not peculiar to Ethiopia. In fact, until the early '70s our uprisings (including the Eritrean situation) were downright benign by the standards of what was going on in Ireland, India, Basque Spain, Canada, the United States, or a dozen other places in a world in turmoil. What was, and perhaps still is, peculiar to us seems to be our manner of "loving" Ethiopia. And, needless to point out, to speak of *love* is to engage poetic diction.

Aside from love, in all its forms and in all its degrees of failure and success, three characteristics mark poetic diction. Their presence may not guarantee good poetry, but their absence makes its arising well-nigh impossible: Honesty of feeling, the inner freedom to declaim the feeling, and the poet's rootedness in the language and myth of his time, in a particular place, among a particular people. How else can you, the poet, give me the words and rhythm for what I experience unless you have so penetrated your own experience that I mistake the cadence of your breath for mine? (The experiments in contemporary European and American poetry do not concern me here. Their predicament is as different from ours as our respective experiences are. They have played their music and now seek clarity. There is nothing wrong with that. For better or for

worse, we are not there yet. Anyone who has read just a few pages of “simple” Amharic prose alongside simple American prose will have no problem grasping my point.)

No wonder, then, that according to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry* Ethiopian poetry is a non-existent entity. How would the encyclopedist know? He wasn't there as I sat listening to a mix of rhythmic prose and razor sharp poetry in Oromo for days and nights on end, any more than I was present for the 44th declamation of Beowulf 1,200 years ago. (Quite a bit of the Oromo saga is on tape too, and will some day see print.)

The Amhara or Oromo poet is not a professional but rather a common sort of individual who breaks into a world of inspired speech for no better reason than the shaman succumbs to the illness that becomes the gateway to worlds that the rest of us cannot see. Whether written in verse or prose, the classical Amhara/Tigray form known as *melk*, *imago*, arising from deep, concentrated visualization, often on the Virgin as physical presence or a mind picture of her, stands alongside the Greek's muse-inspired poem and the shaman's self triggered vision. Make no mistake about it. The *melk* may well be as transformative as the invoked/visualized meditation “deity” of Buddhist tantric practice. Among the Oromo, songs addressed to the poet's mother may have a similar lilt, but the focus would be on remembering rather than transformation. I suspect that similar forms exist among the other peoples of the Horn. But for our similarities, we might find sustaining such intense negative inter-ethnic feelings a bit more difficult. A psychological analysis of Amharic and Oromo poetry would yield a text as rich in inventiveness as Shoa cuisine and might even prove illuminating to boot. Our reluctance to leave home (until the *derg* forced us out at gun point), our tendency to look to the past for guidance, our ludicrous deference to tradition would pack their own poetic power were we to live our confusion honestly without waiting for saviors — from East or West.

There is also the minor problem of publication and dissemination. It is hard to get books from Ethiopia. Considering how hypervocal we are, we do not do much to make sure that our words are heard. If those in power do not censor us (as the Emperor's and Mengistu's regimes both did) we censor ourselves. Parents and teachers and parish priests trained us to listen

rather than speak when we were children. Now they are all gone and there is no one to tell us that we have grown up. (The Somali, and to a lesser extent the Oromo, may be at somewhat of an advantage here. Both cultures tend to be somewhat less authoritarian than their sister cultures.) Among the few useful outcomes of the treacherous Mengistu years may well be that we have all had to learn that there is no legitimate authority except the one given by those at the bottom, that there is no return home, and that whether we disintegrate or hold together, we have no choice but to accept that that conscience is an internal affair quite different from our so external *yilugnita*.

On the bright side, I remember the farewell dinner to which I was treated by my Ethiopian Broadcasting Service colleagues two or three days before I left Addis Abeba in 1972. I am sure the food (at a choice Ethiopian restaurant) was good and mead and beer aplenty. But what has remained with me all these years is something more of the place than fine dishes and fine wine. In this most Ethiopian form of entertainment everyone present composes, or recites from memory, lines of Amharic poetry in keeping with the occasion. And the minstrel, himself a poet, would put it to music on the spot. A poetry jam session, no less. No doubt most of the lines were clever, facile verse. But there were lines that were show-stoppers. And these were followed by accolades for the inspired poet (whether he or she was reciting from memory or composing on the spot) and the moment of silence necessary either to acknowledge the heights to which we had all been raised, or to muster enough courage to back-slide, or to scale still higher if inspiration and talent allowed. Though the form is different, the Oromo (I am familiar only with Wollegai tradition) also jam, the one difference being that the words and beat of the *gairersa* is carried by the poet himself and not by a professional minstrel.

These above paragraphs are but a point of departure for a personal exploration of poetry in the Horn of Africa. To do a modicum of public justice to the vast body of Horn poetry in English, one would need to start by making at least a few poems available in English translation. The linguistic and cultural divide between English and our languages is daunting, but the effort has to be made. For those who like me were nurtured on government-boarding-school *mofo*, the dye is too deep in the wool. We can learn all the languages of the six realms,

but we will always declaim Addis Abeba. I have little choice but to continue in the play-fields of my childhood, and they happen to be Amharic and Oromo with the sporadic Guragae, Tigrai, or Somali words shining through. The *mofo* kids, though they may have received more than most of their sisters and brothers, can give only what they were given: Addis Abeba, wretched settlement of our dreams. And, as staging ground for the exploration of the human condition and source springs to poetry go, I suspect one could do a lot worse than Addis Abeba, Guimbi, or Harar.

The region is still very much in "the age of poetry." The languages are still more available as instruments for play than tools for precise and clear communication. And no doubt, poets from the Horn will continue to take advantage, as others have done before them, of the flexibility, sonority, and synthesizing power of their mother tongues until technical development renders their calling more work than play. In the meantime, as I sit here contemplating the audacity with which I have sacrificed continuity and detail to brevity, I drift south and to the east as does the dry snow outside. How small and vulnerable Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, the places that once defined my world, all seem from this distance.

Art and Ideology in the Plays of Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin

Biodun Jeyifo



By reputation, the Ethiopian playwright Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin is a very active, prolific dramatist "whose plays range from modern and historical works to Amharic translations of such plays as *Macbeth*."¹ But only two of his works are available in published English texts, and these are *Oda Oak Oracle* and *Collision of Altars*. Thus, it may very well be that the most important of the successful works of this remarkable playwright are not accessible to us. Even so, the two texts mentioned here provide enough material for us to assert that in the dramas of Gabre-Medhin we see a rather unique instance of the sharp, contradictory interplay between art and ideology in contemporary African drama.

In explicit ideological intent, Gabre-Medhin is somewhat in the company of such other African writers as Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah, who have made it an important aspect

of their work to go back to legends, folklore, and history in order to identify what elements were negative and what positive in African pre-colonial traditions and experience, so as to refurbish present attempts to overcome colonial and post-colonial alienation.²

While this ideological intent is rather more muted in *Oda Oak Oracle*, it is quite explicitly stated in the playwright's prefatory remarks in *Collision of Altars*:

Ours, Africa's in general, or, in this case, Ethiopia's in particular, is just another part of today's inquisitive generation that must be encouraged to come to terms with its historic past; even that historic past often torn and denied against him. And this, to a lesser or greater extent, may be achieved by the process of re-interpreting to himself, the human events of his past which, in a way, is still responsible for his present conflicting awareness, if not for the shaping of his total future event. It is in this sense alone that a historical play becomes an instrument of history and change. ("Author's Notes")

Though more muted, the playwright's longish subtitle for *Oda Oak Oracle* also, in its own way, expresses this self-conscious burden of ideological purpose in the dramatic enactment: "A legend of black peoples, told of gods and God, of hope and love, and of fears and sacrifices." This mode of expressing his ideological intentions indeed points to an aspect of the texture of Gabre-Medhin's drama which again is more explicitly and fully expressed in both the prefatory remarks in *Collision of Altars* and the elaborate stage directions in the text, namely: an engrossing, even meticulous attention to finding the aesthetic, technical means of effectively achieving his ideological objectives. In Gabre-Medhin's drama, we encounter an even more pronounced manifestation of what we have come to associate with the dramaturgy of Wole Soyinka and Athol Fugard, the continent's greatest playwrights, as much attention to the *aesthetic means* of dramatic expression as its subject matter and social vision.

The subject matter of both *Oda Oak Oracle* and *Collision of Altars* is as deliberately ideological as any subject matter of drama can be, where ideology is understood to be the form and content of consciousness as it pertains to relations between individuals, groups, classes, nations, and races. *Oda Oak Oracle*

dramatizes the tragedy which overtakes three young members of a clan, Goaa, Ukutee, and Shanka, when the rationalist, altruistic outlook which they have imbibed from the "ways of strangers" clashes with the iron-clad hold of ancient xenophobic, anti-rationalist sanctions in thought and behavior on their elders and fellow clansmen. *Collision of Altars* is even more starkly ideological in its dramatization of the disintegrative effects of the competition of different religious faiths for ascendancy in a country, sixth century Axumite Ethiopia, undergoing relentless social decline. Thus, in their general outlines, these plays show Gabre-Medhin's intense concern with some of the important ideological issues of contemporary Africa.

It is of far greater significance for our exploration of Gabre-Medhin's dramatization of ideological conflicts that our playwright takes great pains to show that his concern with ideology is itself ideological, that he takes sides and expresses definite views on the conflicts that arise from relations between men in society. Thus, between them, these two plays can be said to be exemplary in their passionate advocacy of the liberation of human consciousness from obscurantist, virulent, and anti-human myths and modes of thought, especially those dressed in the garb of religion.

It can indeed be asserted with extensive textual supports from the two plays of Gabre-Medhin being discussed here that they are both sustained dramatic critiques of religious ideology and the phobias and alienations to which it often gives rise. In *Oda Oak Oracle* the dominant religious dispensation is the animist, ancestor-cult, magico-religious tradition of an isolated clan; in the course of the drama it confronts an alien religion which is more universalistic, altruistic, and man-centered. In *Collision of Altars* the dominant religious dispensation is the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Sect under the theocratic manipulation of tyrannical emperors and cynical ecclesiastics, and at the point at which it begins to collapse before the rising star (or crescent) of Jihadist Islam.

The sharp focus on religion and the mutant ideological excrescences to which it gives rise, provides a specific context for Gabre-Medhin's ideological purview: this is Ethiopia before the "secular revolution" initiated by the Revolution of 1974 and the policies of the new regime. *Oda Oak Oracle* was published in 1965 and *Collision of Altars* in 1977, having in fact been

written seven years earlier, according to the playwright himself.³ This focus on religion and the different complex strands which it manifests is therefore a faithful reflection of the pre-revolutionary Ethiopia of the Emperor and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and their domination of the Ethiopian state and society.

It does reflect Gabre-Medhin's immersion in the cultural and religious realities of his society that not only the dominant Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but other religious traditions both pre-and non-Christian are given adequate expression in both *Oda Oak Oracle* and *Collision of Altars*. More specifically, while he does not idealize the pagan, animist, pre-Christian religious traditions of many of Ethiopia's nationalities, Gebre-Medhin is somewhat partial to the warmth and reciprocity of these traditions. This attitude, barely expressed in *Oda Oak Oracle*, becomes one of the major themes of *Collision of Altars*, where its ultimate affirmation against the inhuman, dogmatic, dualistic abstractions of Christian theology is given in the encounter between Queen Noba of the "Southern Lake Region" of the "Noble Serpent" religion and her son, the Crown Prince Armah:

I am a Kush, and of this land of Ra
On whose roots the first sun rose,
My body living
As my head is true.
Mine is unlike your hybrid
Devious, little Sabeian mind
Where the quibbles of you Geez tongue
Outlive the living body by far.
With us, the body has a language
The mind cannot speak.
Both live. Without the one
The other is dead: and
The one cannot live
The other's complete life. (63)

All told, then, within the social context of pre-revolutionary Ethiopia of the Emperor, his ecclesiastical potentates, and their aristocratic, anti-people pretensions, Gabre-Medhin's plays constitute an intense, passionate ideological contestation of the religious ideology which underpins and sustains the misrule of the oligarchy and the degradation of the governed. *Oda Oak*

Oracle and *Collision of Altars* both depict dramatic heroes who, perhaps more than in any other plays in contemporary African drama, not only totally refuse to compromise with oppressive and misanthropic misrule sanctioned and rationalized by custom, tradition, or religion, but also give eloquent expression to a humanism built on true solicitude, reciprocity, human warmth, and undogmatic rationalism. In *Oda Oak Oracle* this humanist will and consciousness are embodied in Shanka; in *Collision of Altars* they are incarnated in Armah, though quite often, as in the following bitter lament by the Royal Crier, the humanism finds a voice among those who have been misused by tyranny:

For several long pitiless years
Fear crawled in each night
To hug this dying city of altars.
Tempers rose in the ranks
And grew horny each day.
With each stab of pain
Each ferment of deception
The wooden hearts of god-makers
Throbbled with contempt for each other.
There is no measuring the walls
That rose between
Each interpreter of dreams
Each preached, ranted and collided
In the minds of the strong
And in the hearts
Of the weakest of worshippers.
In this lone city
Where they never cease praying for man
men die most. (*Collision of Altars* 30)

By the evidence of these two plays alone, Gabre-Medhin must be one of the most self-conscious aesthetes working in the contemporary African theater. These plays show that this dramatist pays as much attention to the dramatic forms and the styles of performance suitable for the social vision inherent in his strongly ideological views. Problematically, however, there seems to be a displacement between the progressive content of his plays and the possibly reactionary forms and styles of his theater.

In the first place, the externalities of his dramatic form

show features of a peculiar kind of verse tragedy. Both *Oda Oak Oracle* and *Collision of Altars* depict weak, ineffectual tragic heroes who, though they remain incorruptible and uncompromisable in their volitions, yet sink all too easily into romantic despair before religious ideology. The effusive, poeticized language given these heroes at such crucial moments thus acts as both a refuge and an evasion. With Shanka, this evasion even lapses into wilful self-immolation as he embraces what will certainly be the lynching of himself and the newborn daughter of the dead Ukutee:

SHANKA: We cry
Only to join your hands,
Bitter fate,
Come.
Abortive cry against darkness
Come.
The truer the love
The thornier the fate
And the more reason to die.
Come, darkness, come.
(The child cries a long drawn-out cry).

SHANKA: Sing on,
Child of innocence, sing.
Sing,
The life-giving mother silenced
Sing, Sing on,
Daughter of peace, sing.
Sing, the father
For a forbidden truth condemned,
Sing. Sing on, and forward,
Child of sacrifice, sing.
Sing,
Abortive cry against darkness,
Sing. Sing.
(Repeatedly, the child cries a long drawn-out cry as they approach the mob). (*Oda Oak Oracle* 54)

The curious mixture of indomitable spirit and enervated will in tragic heroes who seek solace or reprieve in poetry places a distinctive mark on Gabre-Medhin's drama, at the same time

that it undercuts his explicit ideological intentions.

The displacement between form and content in *Oda Oak Oracle* and *Collision of Altars* works at an even more crucial level in the theatrical style of both plays. The two plays show a high degree of anti-naturalistic theatrical stylization, even though they do this with dissimilar methods. In *Oda Oak Oracle*, which is constructed as a ritualistic verse tragedy, the stylization takes the form of terseness in language, rapidity of pace, and spareness of action: physical and emotional action are entirely subsumed in ritualistic verse dialogue (even physical combat to the death between Goaa and Shanko is narrated by an individualized chorus which is present at the battle). In *Collision of Altars*, on the other hand, the language becomes more ornate, the pace slower and more deliberate, and the action more complex and many-layered, distributed as it is between silent mime, choreographed cult-dances and narrative declamatory chants. Thus, the stylizing impulse which seems to have been contained and more or less integrated with the imperative of communicating a social vision in *Oda Oak Oracle* becomes an end in itself in *Collision of Altars*. This play calls for the use of all the resources possible in the theater as a meeting ground of diverse arts: sound effects, lighting effects, dance, music, mime, choral chants, cinematic projections, silence. In his prefatory notes, Gabre-Medhin places his performance idiom in this play in the tradition of the so-called "total theater." Considering the meticulous attention to the interrelationships between the different units of performance and the modulations and precision which he advises in his generous stage directions in the playtext, it is not unfair to ascribe to Gabre-Medhin an aspiration to achieve the Wagnerian model of the "*Gesamtkunstwerk*," the "unified, total art work."

Wagner, as is well-known, represents one of the high points of European bourgeois aestheticism in the theater: this is aesthetic practice which draws attention away from the content or substance of drama to the splendid, dazzling mirror of enchantment in the spectacle and phenomenon of performance. This model of theatrical practice is an indulgence anywhere, but even more so in the contemporary African theater. More pointedly, it works against the earnestness and relevance of dramatists like Gabre-Medhin, whose social vision has much to contribute to the current ideological debates in Africa.

NOTES

1. From the blurb on the dust-jacket of *Collision of Altars*.
2. One thinks of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* and Armah's *The Healers and Two Thousand Seasons*. See also Achebe's important essay, "The Novelist as Teacher" in his collection of essays, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1975).
3. See "Author's Notes" in *Collision of Altars*.

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Ideology in B. M. Sahle Sellassie's *Firebrands*

Taddesse Adera



Five years after the bloody Ethiopian Revolution, B.M. Sahle-Sellassie's fourth and latest novel in English, *Firebrands*, was published. It is quite a considerable achievement for Sahle Sellassie to have published these four novels, considering the fact that he writes in a country where the number of novels written in English total fewer than ten, and his works account for nearly half of that number. In addition to his works in English, he has written two other novels, one in Chaha and the other in Amharic.

Firebrands, Sahle-Sellassie's most recent novel, is primarily preoccupied with castigating an Ethiopian feudal social order characterized by rampant corruption, greed, and degradation and dehumanization of the Ethiopian people. Just as Ayi Kwei Armah takes an uncompromising stand against Ghanaian politicians and other corrupt civil servants in his novel *The*

Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Sahle-Sellassie too fearlessly attacks the decadent social structure that has forced people to live in squalor. In fact, there are many similarities between the two novels. Sehle-Sellassie's protagonist, Bezuneh, reminds us of Armah's "the man," who struggles to keep his conscience clear despite tempting and difficult circumstances. Sahle-Sellassie's Kebret and Dejazmatch Azbte parallel Koomson and the other corrupt Ghanian inner party circle officials. And if the "Teacher" in Armah's novel is a concerned but a rather resigned and uncommitted individual, so is Sahle-Sellassie's Dr. Mandefrot, who is practically inactive in the midst of a revolution. Furthermore, inasmuch as Kofi Billy, Maanan, and their friends represent the strong desire for change and the disillusionment created among the youth in the rapidly changing Ghanian society, they can be compared to Worku, Takori, and the general student movement in Ethiopia as depicted in Sahle-Sellassie's novel.

The protagonist of *Firebrands*, Bezuneh, is a fresh graduate from college with no family of his own and thus none of the responsibilities that come with having a family. When he starts to work for the unnamed corporation, we are told that "he came with a clean mind and a clean heart to fight... corruption in government office and public corporations" (31). As is to be expected, five months after his appointment to this position Bezuneh is offered a bribe, a pen and pencil made of silver, from "a wealthy car dealer" and a "foreign national," Mr. Richardson. Bezuneh declines the offer just as "the man" does in Armah's novel several times. However, we learn that Richardson and Bezuneh's boss, His Excellency Ato Kebret, are "long-standing business friends," (18) Richardson providing the bribes and Kebret giving him the business. Bezuneh's determination "to do things right" makes him clash with the immediate interests of his own boss and ultimately results in his dismissal from his job.

It is interesting to note here that both "the man" in Armah's novel and Bezuneh in Sahle-Sellassie's stand up for their principles to the extent that it hurts them as well as their families and friends. They see corruption in their respective societies and take their own individualized actions against it. "The man" thinks that a life sustained by bribery and corruption, no matter how luxurious it may be, "has more rottenness

in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump" (Armah 44). Similarly, Bezuneh believes that "the stink" surrounding his corporation and the country at large "has to be cleared" (Sahle Sellassie 41). If in Ghana "stealing by means of employment... [is] the national game," (Armah 129) in Ethiopia, "theft not discovered is no theft" at all (Sahle Sellassie 31). We are told that in such countries for a person in "a government corporation or in the civil service to carry out one's duty is to do others a favor" (Sahle Sellassie 53).

In both countries, corruption is so deeply ingrained in the very fabric of their societal structures that even "a simple clerk in the town hall could block a big transaction if he wished to" (Sahle-Sellassie 54). According to the narrator of *Firebrands*, the case of Ethiopia is even worse:

A civil servant or an employee of a corporation was a mini-emperor at his own level. Just as senior officials had to pay tribute to the emperor, and just as the junior officials had to pay tribute to the senior ones, so the public was expected to pay tribute to all the diminutive emperors in the civil service and in government corporations. The entire network of the imperial government was there not so much to render service to the public as to receive tribute from it in cash, in kind, or in non-material forms. (54-55)

Despite these horrendous circumstances, Bezuneh and "the man" struggle to keep their sanity intact and their conscience clear by rejecting temptations. Nevertheless, both fail to stick to their principles and both compromise their integrity, Bezuneh at the beginning of the novel, and "the man" towards the end. Even though he faces the strongest opposition from his brother, Worku, Bezuneh takes a bottle of whisky to his boss Kebret, to wish him good luck on his promotion as the managing director of the corporation. "The man" in Armah's novel also compromises the very principles he was willing to fight for when he ultimately yields to the pressures of corruption and condones bribing a boatman. He says to Koomson, his former classmate, now a corrupt government official, "give him something" and when the boatman asks for more money "the man" simply turns towards Koomson and says, "give it to him if there is another one" (175-76). So, when "the man" is ultimately faced with the choice of either helping an old classmate escape, or sticking to

his strong moral values until the end, he chooses the former.

There is no doubt that both Bezuneh and "the man" are victimized by their own governments. While "the man" is condemned to a life of misery (with a meager pay and a boring job), Bezuneh is actually discharged from his job and sentenced to ten years of imprisonment for attempting to kill his boss by choking him to death. One would assume that these two characters who have had a modern education would understand how their respective governments operate and realize that sporadic individual actions or one-man revolutions cannot overthrow corrupt, well-entrenched governments. Unfortunately, such is not the case.

Strangely enough, not once do we see these two "heroes" instigating public unrest, organizing demonstrations and rallies, or even letting their fellow employees know about their dissatisfaction and resentment against their respective employers and their governments at large. True, their isolated actions may have helped them keep their sanity, but even those actions are compromised. In the case of Bezuneh, who we learn has "the courage" when he is on trial to say that he "will not allow anyone to defend [him]" (88) because he thinks that "there is nothing to defend" and that "there is only the truth to be told" (89), one wonders why he is not courageous enough to let his fellow employees know about the existence of such corruption and organize them to take action against it. Bezuneh's naivete and shallowness are further exposed when he is made to deliver a rather lengthy speech during his trial. After several pages, we are told that Bezuneh has very little interest in the verdict; instead, he is interested in exposing "the truth to the public" (89). But the question is: *which public*? He must be alluding to those who are present in the court during his trial, because no one else will be able to hear him since the strong censorship enforced in the country at that time will not allow the mass media to broadcast such things.

It appears as if both Armah and Sahle-Sellassie have realized the deficiencies in their "heroes" and tried to make up for those weaknesses. Armah, for instance, titles his novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and Sahle-Sellassie provides an "alternative hero" (if there is such a thing) to Bezuneh, namely Dr. Mandefrot. Since Bezuneh, just like "the man," does not do anything substantial to make the situation better

for himself and the exploited and oppressed people of his country, Sahle-Selassie skillfully poses a rather reserved and very cautious character, Dr. Mandefrot, as "the real firebrand" of his novel. Mandefrot (whose name literally means "who dares to stand against him") is a professor at Addis Abeba University who is regarded as a sort of "fallen angel" by his own rich and influential relatives. Even though Dr. Mandefrot is presented as a person alienated from his relatives because of his political opinions, we do not see him being a source of inspiration to his students or participating in their struggles.

He realizes, in his own words, that "Ethiopia is sick" and that "it is suffering from a number of ailments" (121). However, he is under the illusion that the solution should come from the same corrupt and rotten government officials who have caused all these ailments in the first place. He expects the government to have "the courage and wisdom to diagnose the problem and find a solution to it," (119) or, as he naively puts it, to "do something about it" (121). But we may ask here, as Armah does in his novel, what do we expect from these corrupt officials, that they "deuncorrupt themselves?" (Armah 154).

One cannot help but wonder here about the political consciousness and maturity of Dr. Mandefrot, who is more like a rebel without a cause. Even this so-called rebellious nature is witnessed only by his relatives. But as far as Worku and his friends in the student movement are concerned, the professor is an enigma who "never takes sides in any issue" (71).

On the other hand, in the eyes of the professor, Worku, Takori, and the other students are a bunch of anarchists who want to destroy everything while not being capable of building anything (71). Granted, Mandefrot believes in reform, but at the same time he is afraid of any radical changes. He seems to be under the impression that Haile-Selassie's feudal regime can reform itself without any need for a revolutionary struggle. In one instance, Worku recounts his discussion with Dr. Mandefrot:

Prof says, 'If you have a house full of bugs and lice, you don't destroy it. It is childish or madness to set it on fire.' And I say to him again that it is best to destroy it completely and to build a new house in its place. And he laughs at me. (72)

If the professor thinks the solution to the problems of the country is the government officials themselves, it would be tantamount to expecting those bugs and lice to get rid of themselves in order to make the house liveable.

Worku's position was actually shared during the late '60s and early '70s by student movements both at home and abroad. The University Students Union of Addis Abeba (USUAA) and the Ethiopian Students Association in North America (ESANA) both repeatedly espoused their positions about the stagnant economic and political conditions in the country in their respective newspapers and journals, and both agreed that the only viable solution to Ethiopia's problems was the ultimate and complete destruction of the feudal regime. For instance, in 1959 in one of its articles, "Struggle," the organ of USUAA states:

The fundamental driving force of history and thus Ethiopian history as well, is the bitter struggles between the ruling classes and the oppressed classes... [and] because our world outlook is based on the class nature of Human societies, the purge of our feudal legacy is imperative. (Wubneh and Abate 37)

It is this position which is being scoffed by Dr. Mandefrot; and it is also at such student militancy that he constantly laughs. For him, any group that calls for the absolute demolition of the feudal power structure has to be an anarchist group. True, he is a character who is described as having totally different perceptions and aspirations from his noble relatives, yet he is also a person who does not seem to understand the aims and motives of the student movement. At one time, he says that the movement is "something not yet defined... Something not yet clearly focused, something amorphous" (119). But soon, after a few paragraphs, he talks about the students as being "the unadulterated conscience of the people" (121). He goes further and says that the students "are fighting not for themselves but for the downtrodden masses. They are fighting against oppression in all its forms" (121). One wonders here whether he is talking about the same students whose movements he referred to earlier as "amorphous" and "not yet defined," and whether he is expecting a well-outlined party program from such student organizations.

When Mandefrot is asked by one of his "noble" relatives,

Dejazmach Azbte, about the problems of the country and the students' demands, right at the beginning of the revolution, the only things the professor remembers are corruption and lack of justice. And, of course, as an afterthought, he reluctantly adds, "Well, the students talk about the existence of some drought and famine [and] about land reform" (120). But university students had been rallying under the slogan "Land to the tiller" as far back as 1965 (Wubneh and Abate 37); and when the Wolo drought began in 1969, many student leaders and some of their professors were harassed and victimized for exposing the government. In 1973, for instance, when the regime was trying to suppress the news about the starvation of thousands of Ethiopians, "three University faculty members who publicized the plight of the famine victims were assigned to obscure provincial administrative posts" (Wubneh and Abate 38). So, how can it be possible for a professor of Dr. Mandefrot's stature to be just vaguely familiar with the famine which resulted in the deaths of millions of people? And how is it also possible for him not to notice that some of his own colleagues and students were missing from the university? Certainly, the argument here is not that the professor should be necessarily an ardent revolutionary (although it seems as if Sahle Sellassie created him with such an intention); but, at least, one would think that he would not keep his mouth shut in the midst of such a horrible human tragedy. The cliché is that in a situation where the immediate conditions demand some sort of action, one becomes either a part of the solution or a part of the problem. It appears as if Mandefrot chose the latter.

During the 1973 student demonstrations, the doctor, as Kebret jokingly observes, was either "perpetually hiding in the library," (20) or, as Takori implies, had "no intention of directly taking part in the riot around the square." But we are told that Mandefrot "wanted at least to be a witness to the event" (133-134). And what does he do? He watches the riot through his office window and gets hit by a "stray bullet" in the leg. Towards the end of the novel, Worku still cannot understand the political stance of the professor. According to Worku, the professor still "seems sort of neutral" (134). But Takori thinks otherwise and believes that "the professor is only cautious because he is under government pay" (134). On the surface, this may seem a sound argument, but not good enough to justify

Mandefrot's indifference. All professors and government employees were and still are in the same predicament. Dr. Mandefrot is actually never seen in action, and yet when leadership is desperately needed, what he can offer is only criticism. He says to Worku and Takori when they go to his office one day to confront him about his neutrality:

...at present we are under the fever of the revolution. We are under chaos, I may even say we are in a mess. Although everybody is against the feudal regime, nobody seems to stand for anything specific. There is no power centre; no law; no order; and no proper direction. All I see is a state of mob action. (144)

This may be true, but who can try to give directions to the revolution and control what Mandefrot calls "the mob action" when educated people like himself "remain indifferent to what is happening?" (143) At best, what Mandefrot does is write in his diary criticizing whatever he sees through his office window. Yes, Takori tells us that Mandefrot's "method of rebellion seems to be more subtle" (134), but we don't see any of this subtlety in action.

Worku and Takori fire a number of questions at the professor when they deliberately go to his office to confront him about his political stance: "What is your role, professor, in this historical event?... You can't remain indifferent to what is happening.... You have to take sides, prof.... You are either for the revolution or against it.... You have to be on one side of the fence or on the other" (143-144). However, since he does not seem to be under what he calls "the fever of the revolution" (145), he ignores their questions and proceeds to lecture them about how the country is in disarray. Little does he know that his criticism does not help to alleviate the country from its present predicament. It is too little too late. The government and those who choose to remain indifferent to the plight of the people have already done the damage. The greatest human catastrophe is already happening in Ethiopia; people are dying of starvation in millions.

In spite of all these factors, in the last chapter of the novel, we are expected to believe that the professor has been all along a revolutionary. Not only does Worku tell us that

Mandefrot had “always had a stand about the revolution” (169), but also we are faced all of a sudden with an excerpt from Dr. Mandefrot’s notebook which actually sounds like an abridged version of *The Communist Manifesto*.

Whatever the professor says at the end is very contradictory to what he has been saying and doing throughout the novel. It seems as if in order to make this character credible, the author found it necessary to preface what we read from Mandefrot’s notebook. Worku, who criticizes the professor time and again for noninvolvement, is now suddenly found saying that the professor “was for [the revolution] all the way” (169). If so, it is difficult to understand his reluctance to contribute to the revolution in any real capacity. If the professor is concerned at all, it does not take a genius to figure out that his concern comes far enough away from the people and their revolution so that he is safe, yet close enough that he can simply watch what is going on from his office window. Just like the “teacher” in Armah’s novel who does practically nothing except lie around naked and agonize in his misery, the professor in Sahle Sellassie’s novel too is an uncommitted individual who just wants to record history from his ivory tower.

If Bezuneh’s struggle is mainly to stick to his compromised integrity and to bask in his ego-driven theatrical bravado, Professor Mandefrot’s effort may be to simply fill his notebooks with some eventful things, with the hope of being published one day and becoming popular all over the nation. The characters who are actually physically present with the people and directly contributing to the struggle are Takori and Worku. Unfortunately, however, they are presented in the novel as two ultra-left radicals who do not know what they want and who join the crowd for the mere pleasure of chanting slogans. This is certainly not an accurate representation of the student movement and its participants. Historical records show that Ethiopian student activism “made an important contribution to the fall of imperial rule” (Wubneh and Abate 38). From their famous slogan of “land to the tiller” in the ’60s, to publicizing the plight of the famine victims in the ’70s, and even to demanding the abdication of the emperor himself, the Ethiopian students have fought selflessly and gallantly for many years.

Maybe Worku is right when he tells his brother Bezuneh

about the characteristics of those intellectuals he calls “stone-age graduates”; and maybe it is a fitting description of some educated people like Dr. Mandefrot:

They talk loud and vow to rebel as students, but no sooner do they join the rotten government than they keep their mouths shut. Of course, they grumble like slaves, criticise the efficiency of the bureaucracy, damn the ancient officials for nepotism and corruption — all in a whisper at parties! But they never act. Cowards! (11-12)

Despite the fact that Worku shows time and again that he is capable of thinking on his own, he is constantly perceived by the narrator, by Mandefrot, and by Bezuneh as a hot-tempered and confused anarchist. This is even further expounded during one of Worku and Takori’s discussions, which the narrator calls a “mental gymnastics,” when Worku adamantly refuses to accept, even to discuss, the domination of other cultures by the ruling Amhara culture. For some strange reason, Worku, who is one of the most outspoken radicals of all the characters in the novel, is presented as a naïve and confused person when it comes to the question of nationalities. At times he seems to defend the Amhara nationality, and at other times he suggests a Marxist solution to the problems of nationalities in the country.

To a certain extent, it seems as if Takori is portrayed in a more positive light than Worku. Besides being a student-militant, as a non-Amhara he understands very well the plight of other nationalities. Nevertheless, even Takori himself does not seem to know how to wage the struggle against the domination of the Amhara culture. He believes that “tribal issue overshadows” class war (47) and speaks out against the importation of foreign ideologies (specifically Marxism), and yet he does not provide any tangible solutions to the problems of nationalities and to that of the country at large. Ultimately, therefore, one cannot help but wonder who the actual nutcrackers, the real *Firebrands*, are in this novel.

Even though it is evident that the narrator-author stands behind the “heroic” acts of Bezuneh and Dr. Mandefrot and expects the reader to applaud them, it becomes difficult to do so for reasons discussed earlier. If Takori and Worku, who had the greatest potential to be the heroes of the novel, were not dis-

missed earlier as inept individuals who are simply swept away by the currents of the revolution, it would have been easier for the reader to easily identify them as the real "Firebrands" of the novel. Since Bezuneh and Mandefrot are forced upon the reader, and Takori and Worku are dismissed because of their so-called immaturity and anarchist behavior, it appears as if there are no firebrands in *Firebrands* who stand genuinely for the plight of the masses.

Whatever the case may be, one cannot deny the fact that Sahle-Sellassie's delineation of the military is superbly done. "The Ethiopian Soldier," as one of his characters so rightly points out, "has always acted as the oppressive arm of oppressive regimes.... He stifled the voice of the peasants, of the workers, and of the intelligentsia as well" (146). Therefore, to think that such an organized oppressive machine can lead the country towards equality and justice would be preposterous. The Ethiopian Army has aborted the 1974 revolution of the people, called itself the liberator of the country, and imposed its dictatorial rule for 17 long years merely because it is "an organized force" and it has "what nobody else has, the gun" (146). This is exactly what happens in Armah's novel too.

According to the narrator of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, if Nkrumah came to power "with the help of the people who loved him and believed in him" and used that power for himself, the new military government of Ghana "with the help of guns, had come to this same power" and abused it (Armah 157). What changed in Ghana after the military coup? "New people, new style," but the same "old dance.... Now another group of bellies will be bursting with the country's riches!" (Armah 157-158)

Firebrands and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* have strong thematic similarities, but the techniques and style of writing of the two authors are distinctly different. Sahle-Sellassie may lack the fantastic metaphors and the exuberant and meticulous symbolism of Armah, but it should be noted that English is the Ethiopian author's third language.

Despite his stylistic limitations, and the inconsistencies in some of his characterizations, Sahle-Sellassie's astute observation and depiction of crucial and current issues such as corruption and injustice during the infamous, decadent and now-defunct regime of Haile-Sellassie is to be applauded. His

novel not only exposes the maladministration, outright theft, and debauchery by the feudal government, but also takes a bold and daring step to criticize the military junta which ousted the emperor and assumed power by force. To the extent that the novelist and his characters are aware at the end that "the Ethiopian Revolution is yet to come," one may say that *Firebrands* ends on a prophetic note, especially in light of the recent overthrow of the military and Marxist government.

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Literary Criticism / AFRICA

This anthology, which is the first of its kind ever on Ethiopian literature, aspires to provide insights into a body of literature which had been marginalized more than other post-colonial literatures. The articles collected here trace and analyze the development of Ethiopian languages and literatures from Ge'ez to the first Amharic novel, *T'obbia*. In an attempt to create balance, effort has also been made to incorporate representative critical works from almost all modern literary forms. This collection intends to provide readers with a general insight and an increased awareness of the richness of Ethiopian literature.

The volume brings together a number of scholars and practitioners of the world whose interest in the subject matter is rivaled only by an equally compelling interest in reading and situating Ethiopian literature in the wider context of world literature. In this sense, other scholars and interested readers will have at their disposal the means/tools to engage in inter- and intra-literary studies. Since this volume has a pre-cursorial contour, and since it is the first, it is hoped that it will engender discussion and pique the interest of the reading public.

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